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DARK REGIONS 2



The Short Story Anthology • Magazine of Weird Fiction



DAK REGIONS

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DEDICATION: Special thanks goes to my wife, Patti, for all her devotion, Joe at Copy Mat for helping out, Jeannette M. Hopper for her fine proofing and dedication, Kevin J. Anderson for his persistence of excellence in the small press, the SPWAO for getting us amateurs out of the wings!, and mostly for J.N. Williamson and other pros who support us. Thanks to one and all!

Acknowledgments: Hi, folks. I would just like to give you a little bit of past honorable credit and background on our prestigious contributors. So, here we go!

MARTHAYN PELEGRIMAS is quite a poet and has seen print in such zines as 2AM, TWISTED, OMAHA WORLD HERALD as well as in-house publications. Here's a direct quote from her letter on the art of producing terror: "It has always seemed to me that the ordinary, commonplace, holds the higher degree of terror. I want to make my readers afraid of the everyday experiences, look behind them while they push their cart through the grocery store, wonder about those new neighbors. The shower scene in PSYCHO made viewers afraid in their own bathroom. That's real fear."

And, speaking of the ordinary, let's pause here for a second and delve into the unordinary with ALBERT J. MANACHINO! Albert is the veteran of veterans in the small press. He is one of those unique characters who are obsessed with writing wacky-horror/fantasy stories, and that's what makes him so unique and special. RON LEMMING put it excellently in the Jan/Feb '87 SPWAO NEWSLETTER, "Al

Manachino is to horror what Ron Goulart is to Science Fiction; that rare bird of bright plumage, a genuine humorist." We at DR all agree with Ron, and will look forward to receiving more of Al's work. Now, on to his overdo credits! He has been published so much in the small press, it's a wonder he's not a pro. He has graced the pages of ARGONAUT and 50 to 60 other small press zines. (WOW!) Also, a collection, entitled, THE BOX HUNTERS AND OTHERS has received rave reviews, and I'm waiting to receive my copy right now from

POTBOILER BOOKS, how about you?

Well, here is a bit of an unknown: KEVIN SPEIRS; but nonetheless his work is a pleasure to read, as you will soon find out, when you partake of his story in this issue. Please, after reading the tale do not mock the unknown, ok?

BENTLEY LITTLE - Does this guy need any introduction, either? No, but we're going to give him one, anyway. Bentley has been published in NIGHT CRY, THE HORROR SHOW (consistently, I might add), GRUE, SPACE & TIME, and his short story, THE BACK ROOM, was chosen for the anthology, BRINGING DOWN THE MOON. (Believe me, this is an excellent anthology, published by SPACE & TIME. Check it out, I did.) I wouldn't be suprised to see a novel come out by this guy. His weird tales have the mark of a pro.

CLINTON LAWRENCE is another relative newcomer, but you can't tell by the tale included here. He's been published in THE COLOR COMPUTER MAGAZINE, and has a story coming up in OWLFLIGHT. As a matter of fact, another tale by him is now under consideration for DARK REGIONS, right now! Thanks, Clinton.

KEITH HUDSON - This is a strange guy who writes horror and fantasy, takes all of his works (the only copies, mind you!) and loses them all on a rapid transit system. Then, he asks me if I have them on file, and, when I tell him I don't, flips off God. Then, I show him the work I have accepted for DR, and he hates it, screaming for revision. I shake my head. He flips off God. "A pleasant man to work with?" you might ask. Well... At any rate, he hasn't been published anywhere but DARK REGIONS, and that's probably because he doesn't try. I keep nagging him, but you know how that

goes...

MICHAEL C. MCPHERSON - Well he didn't send me much about himself, but this guy has sent me a hell of a lot of manuscripts. Talk about inundation! He has been published in GREEN FEATHER, THE FAMILY, WRITER'S NEWSLETTER GAZETTE, and will be published in HAUNTS & PUBLISHED. He's also working on a horror novel. We wish you the best of success with it, Mike!

LEO BIGLEY - Well, I asked him to send me some info, but I never received it. Oh, well. Suffice it to say, Leo has been published in the small press before, and if he continues to write tales like THE GARDENER, I suspect we'll be seeing a lot more of his work in the future.

A.R. MORLAN - God, here's another guy who's been published so much in the small press it just about takes your breath away. Not only that, he is a consistent contributor to NIGHT CRY. I wouldn't be surprised if it's every issue, and deservedly so. Other credits are THE TWILIGHT ZONE, THE HORROR SHOW, GRUE, and DOPPLEGANGER. Also, his letters are very polite. We like that.

Kathleen Jurgens - thinks bibliographies are the pits, so we'll subject her and everyone to a brief synopsis of her hobbies, in her own words: "I write a column for POTBOILER. I publish a school newspaper: have an ulcer; have a houseful of garage sale finds, plants, and Barbie and Ken accessories. I am working on a novel (who isn't) that requires more research at this point than actual writing. I'm going on an archeological dig in June (part of the research) and am looking forward to attending the WORLD FANTASY CONVENTION in Rhode Island in October." This may be a little outdated, but it gives you an idea of where

this talented lady is coming from. Anyway, Kathleen has been published in 2AM, PORTENTS, and other small press zines.

Barbara Proenza is a poet, a short story and non-fiction writer who has been published in WONDER TIME CHILDREN MAGAZINE, WRITER'S GUILD and MYTHELLANY FANTASY MAGAZINE, and a whole lot more. She doesn't say much about herself other than that she and her three-year-old daughter love to watch scary shows together.

COLLEEN DRIPPE states that EARTHTRIP is the 28th story she has sold so far, and there's no doubt in my mind for the reason why. Just take a look at the credits: THE HORROR SHOW, GRUE, BIFROST, BEYOND, INFINITUM, OWLFIGHT, HAUNTS, SHOWCASE '86, GREEN FEATHER, etc., etc. Need we say more?

Jeannette Hopper - Now, this is a lady who will rise with the tide of the new pro writers. Given time, I think I'll be sitting down to a cup of Columbian coffee and ANOTHER ONE of Jeannette M. Hopper's novels. She is appearing in J.N. Williamson's, HOW TO WRITE TALES OF HORROR, FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION. She is the editor of that outrageously gross newsletter, GAS, and she is one of the assistant editors of DR. DARK REGIONS will be publishing her first chapbook, EXPIRATION DATES, and proud of it! She has been published in PORTENTS, SCYOPHANT and will be published in THIN ICE. This lady has her hands into everything!

Kevin J. Anderson - This is one particular writer whom I think deserves a lot more credit than he has received. Every time I pick up a small press zine with his name on it, I know for a fact that his story will be one of the best in the issue. It's always reassuring to know you can depend upon one of your

(ACKNOWLEDGMENTS continued on
MAIL page)



Dear Readers.

Well, we're back, and I think with even more exciting fiction and artwork than before, and possibly a few improvements to boot. (We're still working on a new design and format for DR. So, hang in there!) But before we fall head long into any of this, I would like to welcome Jeannette M. Hopper to the editorial staff of DR. She is our new Assistant Editor, and I would like to thank her for all the fine proofing, advice, and just for being a damn good friend.

I would also hope you have noted the two new departments in DARK REGIONS: "The Writer's Corner," this issue is being written by Kevin J. Anderson. This is just a little input on how-to-write short stories by the best in the small press; and "A Book Review:" from Stephen King to William Hope Hodgson. This issue's review is by Jeannette M. Hopper. Her review sheds a little bit of light on Chelsea Quin Yarbrow's: MESSAGES FROM MICHAEL..., and you can expect additional departments in the future. I'll let you know what they are right here.

Now, let's abandon all this for the nonce, and dive into a small and passing subject: (just for the heck of it) What does the title DARK REGIONS truly mean? I have received quite a few letters (Thank you one and all for the kind words and critiquing you gave DARK REGIONS #1) seeming to hint that DARK REGIONS ultimately means death, the void, the all-consuming pit, and other such nonsense. No, actually, DARK REGIONS should instill within the reader, the passing of an individual character (or characters) through perilous regions. This does not mean every story selected will have to deal with death, merely to suggest at it would be a better generality. Things that happen horribly do not necessarily mean someone's ultimate demise, but then again, it could. That is the beauty of such titles as GRUE, 2AM, PORTENTS, THE HORROR SHOW, and DARK REGIONS.

So, grab a comfortable chair, beanbag, or whatever you have handy to relax in, and get absorbed in DR, possibly, before it decides to absorb you, and you just might find yourself seeing that a few characters do survive, ultimately, but believe me, dear reader, only a very few survive, and that's just the luck of the cards.

Pleasant reading,

Joe Morey

Joe Morey
Editor & Publisher





THE GARDENER

BY

LEO BIGLEY

Amoram, Selias, Kardu! Great and powerful, knowing all that is unknown, revealing your secrets to the devoted...

There it was again, that annoying, painful scream in the distance, growing louder and louder, breaking his concentration. He tried to push the voice aside, the incantation disturbed, beginning to fade away.

Tiberius, Annanka, Routa! Reveal the strength of the illusions you hold in the darkness...

It was no use. The scream had broken through, had forced him out of the world of magic and into the reality of...

"Critch! What the hell are you doing out there? Can't you hear me calling, or are you off in that damned dream-world of yours again? I told you to keep away from those books!"

Critch opened his eyes and sighed, looking down upon the freshly-turned soil and neatly tended rows of tomato plants, the heat of the early afternoon drying the sweat that ran from his forehead. He was leaning on his right foot, a well-worn brown leather boot pressed against the blade of the shovel, his hands grasped about the splintered wooden handle. She was right. He had drifted off again, his mind wandering off into the realm of the Dark Ones - as it was meant to when he worked out in the garden, the offering he had planted in the spacious backyard of his two-story country home. Barbara's kids had insisted that he construct a tennis court or swimming pool in its place, something he flatly refused to do. It had become another of the growing tensions that separated them, another drop in the broth of hate that boiled among them. Yet, he wasn't to be blamed. Barbara had never mentioned having any offspring when she talked him into marrying her, four years ago. They seemed to drift in from nowhere, like ghosts come to haunt an archeologist who had stumbled across a tomb cursed by some forgotten necromancer.

"Critch! When the hell are you going to stop working that filthy patch of dirt and get cleaned up? I told you yesterday that Robert was coming by this morning. Now, get moving, for God's sake."

Robert; otherwise known as William R. Neon, Attorney at Law, the pet snake which Barbara kept wrapped around her little finger. Whenever "Robert" came calling there was trouble brewing.

Critch stepped back from the shovel, raising it up into the air and driving it back down into the garden, as if it were a willow stake piercing the heart of a shrieking vampire. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and pulled off his gloves, tossing them down beside the shovel.

"I don't want to see Robert. He's your friend. You do the honors of entertaining him."

Critch walked back toward the east entrance of the house, where

Barbara stood, reaching underneath his opened shirt and clutching the small, gold idol that swung from around his neck. The tiny, three-headed figure represented the star, Algol, one of the many heavenly bodies he prayed to during times of crisis. Algol had been in his thoughts for many days now, the tensions between him and his "family" nearing the inevitable point of explosion. The fact that they were trying to have him committed wasn't helping the matter, and if the gods would answer his prayers and reveal the solution he needed, perhaps his family would be reunited or, at least, pacified.

Critch hesitated for a moment as he came to the plum tree that stood beside the porch. The plum tree, his great failure. The ancient thing had been there when he bought the house, a twisted old veteran of a thousand storms, a tree he had promised the gods to bring back to life as a sign of his devote following. Yet, the tree had been unresponsive and remained dry, lifeless...

Critch quickly recited the Thandorian prayer under his breath as he passed Barbara on the porch, the prayer he had said twice an hour ever since discovering his family's intentions.

"Draw us to drink from one cup. Let the torments lie buried. Bring the dead to fruition. Draw us to drink from one cup."

Barbara shook her head in disgust as Critch shoved his way past her into the cool interior of the house. She brushed away the dust that had been smeared onto her blouse.

"You really are mad," she hissed at him, her nose drawn up with revulsion. "Why the hell I ever left Walter Simons to marry you..."

Critch released the small idol beneath his shirt as he continued on toward the living room, at the west end of the house. "I inherited the controlling shares to Gulfland Oil. Don't you remember?"

Yalu, Pennak, Wallah-Benne. Show me the path to the Gates of Celestial Eternity...

Barbara watched as he passed into the shadows of the hallway leading to the west end of the house, the garden framed behind her from where she stood in the doorway.

"The day you die will be the happiest moment in my life," she screamed after him. Her voice reflected from the narrow walls as if she had been calling down the shaft of a bottomless well.

Robert Neon was an evil-looking little man with a great, swollen stomach that reminded Critch of the potbellied carving he kept hidden behind the bookcase in the den. Robert must have been about fifty or sixty, his face red and blotchy, his fingernails untrimmed and curled at the ends. Today, he was wearing a dark blue, pin-striped suit that looked as if he had slept in it for three or four days, the material carelessly stitched in several places. He wore an immense, gold watch on his pudgy left wrist and a tremendous ruby ring on his right forefinger. He smelled of butter rum and maple, and when he smiled, as he was doing now, as his chubby hand extended out toward Critch, his expression was that of a hungry alligator swimming after a drowning child.

Critch ignored the outstretched hand and sat down on a leather chair near the window overlooking the front driveway, oblivious to his three step-children who had positioned themselves, like impatient vultures, about the couch that Robert had been domineering in the center of the room. The front living room always seemed somewhat uneasy and gray, despite the afternoon sun it received and the bright tapestries that hung suspended about the fireplace.

Perhaps it was the subject matter of the tapestries that gave the room its uncomfortable sensation, thought Critch. After all, they depicted sixteenth century witch-burnings, in fabrics woven especially for him by one of the many occult shops he frequented in the city, some fifty miles away. Of course, Barbara and the children were horrified by his choice of interior decoration, one of a growing list of things they disliked about him. But they were powerless as long as he controlled the money in the family, something that they were fighting to change.

Robert turned away from Critch as Barbara entered the room, and directed his smile toward Critch's wife as she stood by the fireplace. Suddenly realizing that she was near the dreaded tapestries, she hurried over to the couch and sat beside Robert.

"It's always good to see you and the children again," he said, his voice sounding like a bad imitation of Peter Lorre with a mouthful of broken teeth and blood. He called them the "children," although the youngest of them was past twenty six. Barbara smiled in return, her eyes shining coldly.

"And good to see you again, Robert. You said that you were coming out today to discuss the proceedings?"

"The proceedings," thought Critch. Critch Flugelman vs. the State: a sad result of the trouble he had gotten into after leaving the house last year following one of Barbara's tirades. He had moved into an apartment outside the city, having forgotten about the approaching winter solstice. Archad, the demon that controlled the dying sun of the season, demanded a sacrifice at that time, a ritual that Critch



religiously observed. He gathered together the necessary instruments to perform the ceremony, barely in time to start the magic potions and incantations before the eleventh hour. Yet, the problem of the offering remained, and, fearing that his neglect would allow the sun to escape and not return to the Pit of Sardu, he quickly slipped outside and climbed into the neighbor's backyard, clubbing their golden retriever to death and then dismembering it, carrying back the blood-dripping carcass to his apartment's fireplace and tossing the remains onto the roaring fire he had built. The smell of burning flesh had been strong, however, and someone had called the police. The authorities had a field day filling out their reports, thinking at first that Critch had butchered the neighbor's three-year-old daughter, gathering enough evidence to have Critch put into a mental ward for five months. He was eventually released on a technicality, but Barbara had seen her chance. Robert had done his job well, taking photographs of the ceremonial chambers that Critch had built and the occult tapestries, of the stone idols and demons and the sacrificial altar that smoldered beside the garden in the backyard and, finally, of the garden, itself: a massive pentacle that, somehow, blossomed all year long. He gathered together his snapshots and began the legal proceedings to send Critch packing off to the nuthouse again, leaving Barbara and himself as executors of Critch's holdings. Critch had, of course, fought the proceedings, yet, for some reason, the gods had not answered his supplications. Perhaps there was something missing. Perhaps the gods needed more...

The garden had been Critch's only solace. He tended it and nurtured it, burning its ripened produce on the altar he had built beside the pentacle. Only the plum tree, the scraggly old centurian growing beside the house, remained barren and dry, its twisting limbs scratching against the windows of the study whenever the winds blew -- sharp, wooden fingers reaching out for Critch to remind him that his offerings to the Dark Ones were imperfect, that his living testimonial was incomplete. If only he could get the tree to blossom... maybe this would please the gods into helping him. He had been secretly rounding up the neighborhood dogs and adding them to his offerings, to help offset his failure; but now the neighbors were beginning to catch on. What else was needed? What else could he do?

The "children" that had gathered around Barbara and Robert had remained still, but now they, too, threw their insults at Critch.

"Can't we get this over with?" said the oldest. He and the two younger offspring had latched onto their mother's meal ticket from the start, leeching off Critch's hospitality as if they had been lamprey eels feeding from his jugular vein. The younger pair nodded their heads in agreement with the eldest. "Yes. Let's get it over with," they mumbled stupidly. "Are we going to put Daddy away or aren't we?"

"Now, let's go about this like adults," said Robert, sounding like the Big Bad Wolf with a belly full of grandmas and Little Red Riding Hoods. "However, I am inclined to agree with the children, Critch. I intend to return to the Court of Appeals and submit the final documents concerning your reinstitution, which will, no doubt, follow soon afterward. You have to face it, Critch: you're a sick man, and we're trying to help you."

Critch was staring out through the large, bay window beside him, watching as a pair of bluejays fought over a luckless catapillar they had discovered, the squirming creature was ripped in two and swallowed alive. He stretched and got up from his chair only to be confronted by Barbara who was standing only a few feet away. She was enraged, her eyes glaring at him like two coals glowing in a dark cavern, her

thin neck taught, the muscles beneath the spotty brown skin flexing.

"You lunatic!" she hissed, a wide smile of triumph crossing her sharp, emaciated features. "We're finished with you. Did you hear that? Once Robert leaves today you'll be as good as gone, which is what I've wanted to see ever since you began this idiotic devil worship of yours. See if your voodoo rituals can conjure up a way to get you out of this one, or do you think you're man enough to act on your own without the help of your childish playroom fantasies? You can go to hell, along with the rest of your idols and demons, and tell the lot of them that I'm laughing at you, at them..."

Critch pushed his way around her, his body shaking with frustration, not knowing what to say, or if he should say anything at all. Robert called after him as Critch headed up the stairs toward the study, which faced out over the garden, its windows opening to reveal the barren plum tree whose branches reached out like a living skeleton clawing its way up the muddy slope of a mass grave.

"You have to face the facts, sooner or later," Robert called. "They're going to come for you before the week is out. It's all for the best. You can't expect anything to stop that, now."

They heard his footsteps pass down the hallway to the study, and the door to Critch's private, occult workshop slamming shut. Barbara smiled again, looking about the room at Robert and her children.

"Let that fool go to his gods," she said, with a smart little laugh. "Maybe they can give him peace of mind. Not even Hell, itself, can keep him out of the sanitarium, now."

Amarath, Sadu, Pericels, Kobodum, Draconum, Dacodum, Zirlon of the Swirling Mists of the West. Guide me. Feel me calling you. Help this Son of Darkness who has lost his way in the world of fire and light...

Critch knelt before the altar, which faced the eastern wall of the study, his arms crossed over his chest, his face turned up to stare upon the visage of the goat-headed idol that stood towering above, one of the four great statues he had commissioned, one for each of the cardinal directions. Yagu was leader, his back to the eastern horizon, facing, instead, to the west, to watch the sun sink below the mountains as the powers of darkness and starlight returned to the earth.

Critch waited for a response, for a gust of wind, a clicking or scratching, anything that would signal that the great god had heard him. Yet, there had been nothing, no movement, no sound to reveal that the gods had the slightest interest in what he had to say. He stood up and walked over to a chest of drawers set beside the northern cardinal statue, an eagle-headed figure with the body of a dragon, its wings stretched out and covering the entire length of the wall. This was Midon, the Winged Hater of the Living Flesh, perhaps the only god that ever responded to Critch in a true moment of crisis. The other gods demanded sacrifices before they would act. With Midon, he could ask first and pay later.

Critch pulled a triangular-shaped crystal from the bottom drawer of the cabinet and placed it at the clawed feet of Midon, kneeling down beside the statue as he had at the altar before Yagu, the crystal translating his words into the language Markeis.

"Please help me," he prayed, listening as the wind began to swirl outside, a sure sign that Midon was present; and then, aloud, "Please, save me from the ones who would take me, who would destroy me. Oh

great Midon, I would destroy them instead, had I the courage, yet, I cannot bring myself to do it. I deliver them in turn to you, to do with them as you please, as flesh for your feast. Take them, for I cannot find the strength within my soul to go on this way. Save your devoted servant, before it is too late!"

Critch knew that Midon was listening. He could communicate with the demon through the crystal before him, but Midon could express himself in any manner he saw fit. Now, as Critch knelt before him, the hideous entity came forth, the evil monstrosity that he had chose as his protector drawing up from the pit and gathering him into its arms, spinning him around to face the creature he had come to know over the last two years, one of the Seven Horrors that he dealt with and honored. He cried out in relief as the rotten thing slipped through the eastern wall of the room, a swirling fog wrapping him in a gray, smoky mob of lesser demons; dancing, drunken beings of all description taking him by the hand as they moved in a spinning circle about the floor. The goat-headed figure of Yagu was now animated and dancing in the center of the circle, its stone body as nimble upon its flinty hooves as any human dancer that Critch had ever witnessed. The song of Iwaken was being played on a pipe and horn by the other two cardinal statues, who stood off to the side, their forms swaying from side to side as the music and dancing increased in intensity and excitement. The sound of a great explosion came from downstairs, accompanied by a series of hysterical screams and wild cries, the gurgling of bloodfilled throats echoing in unison with



the demonic laughter of the ethereal bacchanal taking place in the study.

Critch smiled as the dancers melted together into the blackness that signaled approaching nightfall, knowing that he would soon fall asleep, that his friends, the gods, had not deserted him in his moment of need. Yet, how had they solved his problems, and how was he to repay them if they had? What would he offer the Dark Ones in return for their favors? He had already sold them his soul many years before...

Critch sat quietly on the porch overlooking the backyard, the shadows of the house growing longer as the evening sky darkened. He lifted the wine glass, admiring the color of the vintage, a deep, bloody red.

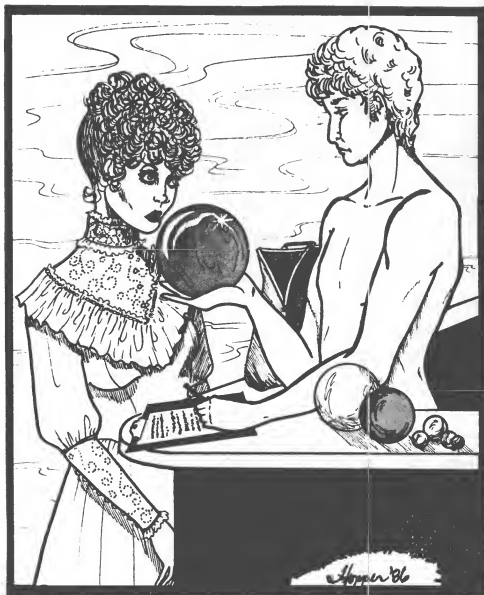
Anathious, Ragnoroc, Klytus...of the Earth and for the Earth, from the Pit of Fire and to the constellations of Pirus and Cellebus, the Marksman and Dragon...

Critch was contented. Now he was alone with the gods, with the demons and powers that truly controlled the universe, free to laugh at the conjecture and philosophy of a thousand dying religions that flared and sputtered out as the world matured. Now that the Dark Ones had proved to him that their strength was dominant and eternal, he could relax. They had sent their messenger, in a form he could understand.

Of course, the local authorities had come calling after his family and Robert had been missed. They discovered his past, found the pending proceedings against him and logically assumed that he had done away with his threatening relatives. The police searched the house and found nothing. They questioned about the reconstruction along the eastern walls, but Critch had been wise and told them the story prepared for him by Yagu, the story about his wanting to conserve energy. The walls insulated, the windows replaced with double panes...

Critch smiled to himself again, amazed at the ease with which he had painted over the scratches on the walls and replaced the shattered windows, how he had resurfaced the floor after mopping up the traces of blood. Yet, the police were unsatisfied and asked for a polygraph test, which he complied with. He hadn't killed anyone, certainly not his family. The authorities sifted through the ashes of his backyard altar and finally dug up the garden itself, finding no traces of human remains in either the ashes or the soil they had disturbed. The police gave up, unable to determine anything other than the fact that Critch's family and their lawyer had disappeared, and that Critch was not in the least bit unhappy that they had. There was no law against being overjoyed with one's relatives disappearing...

The garden had returned to its former splendor, having healed after months of nurturing and care, the pentacle bearing fruit for his evening sacrifices as it never had before. So, too, was the plum tree blooming, come to life and bearing its fruit as well, the product of which Critch now drank from his alabaster goblet. His backyard showplace was complete with the rebirth of the ancient tree, its stately branches reaching out over him in a protective canopy, the jagged, razor-sharp bark of its trunk and limbs glistening with sap in the afternoon light, the folds of the trunk convoluted as if they were the inner tissues of a gigantic sea anemone, and a happy, grinning



INSUFFICIENT BAGGAGE

BY

MARTHAYN PELEGRIMAS

"Here comes the bride, all dressed in white."

The cane chair crunched beneath her weight as she climbed onto its seat. She fussed with a shoulder-length veil, lowering the rope, tightening its noose around her neck, feeling it itch through beaded lace; she hoped the knot would hold.

From inside a silver frame, the brown eyes of her handsome fiance stared, captured on Kodachrome.

Sunlight illuminated the small bedroom this spring day in March. Standing on the creaking chair in silence now, no change of plans, no last requests. Smoothing the ruffled gown, tidying hair pinned and sprayed into frozen curls: a snow queen, melting from the inside out. Rhinestone prisms, attached to shoes fresh from their box, reflected colorful spectrums onto the ceiling.

"Here comes the bride, here comes the..."

- KICK -

"...bride."

Free to skid across the floor, crashing into a wall, the cane chair fell to rest. A few improvised skips, a twist, a jerk against the gagging tempo, then a single tear made its way down the girl's bluing cheek to mingle with saliva that dripped from a corner of her gaping mouth.

The grotesque bride swung back and forth. White satin shoes danced above the wax, a grim waltz performed in solo; back and forth.

"Stay in line, please," the attendant called. "We'll get to all of you, don't worry."

Cynthia Farrow was worried. This was her third time through check-in procedures. How had she known that? How was it she remembered the first two visits had failed to get her inside? Sent back to start over. "Three times is lucky, the charm," she assured herself.

She watched a young man, executive type, being checked through Station One. A duffle bag in his left hand, an attache case in his right, it seemed quite enough for a man his age.

Continuing to watch, Cynthia saw the attendant nod, pointing the man toward Station Two. Not good.

It was always spring at the baggage station. Each arrival had been a pleasurable experience: soft light glowed through the surrounding pink clouds, the essence of roses drifted through the air, although none were visible; carnations too, and...green.

"Can you smell green?" Cynthia wondered. The mossy green of ferns scattered throughout her apartment the last time - the time she almost married David. Musky, jungle green, trees so dense they had sheltered her during afternoon rains while she played, the first time born. The first time in a wild place, lush and soft.

Some time passed, no one kept track, and the line maintained its number. Those advancing from inspection were replaced by new waiters.

A little boy, six years old, was now at the head. Bending down to make eye contact, the attendant inspected a G.I. Joe lunchbox and small pillow clutched between stubby fingers. The boy was laughing. The man made a call; they both waited. A guide appeared from the pink-tinged mist. Her skin sparkling with light, she escorted the child past all stations.

"Who was she?" Cynthia asked the old woman behind her. "Have you ever seen anyone so beautiful?"

"No. I don't know her."

Cynthia noticed the woman was carrying only a handbag, clutching it to her chest. "Where's your baggage?"

"This is all I have," the old woman said. "This is all I have." She started to cry.

Cynthia turned. Sadness was something she had never been good at. Bending to brush a bit of dust from her satin shoes, the bride was struck with her situation. Quickly, she looked to the right side of her feet. There stood two large, matching suitcases.

"Thank God. Maybe this time I'll make it."

Darkness never came and still the line moved, slowly, toward the stations. Attendants checked in baggage of all shapes from hundreds of owners, never tiring, never showing signs of complaint.

"Cynthia Ann Farrow. Please proceed to Station One." The guard directed her to a yellow area, where a handsome attendant was smiling in her direction.

"Cynthia, so soon? It seems you were just here."

"I know, Sam." She surprised herself, recalling the stranger's name. Her expression caused his reply.

"Don't be concerned. Everything comes back to you while waiting in line. It's an unbirthing period. Relax."

His eyes were the blue of tropical waters with flecks of jade floating to the surface. She had known this man before. He was perfect, kind, and Cynthia felt comfort in his presence. She had been here before, too. This was home.

"Now, let's check your baggage." He lifted the smaller suitcase, setting it in front of him on the waist-high counter. Cynthia leaned to look inside. She hadn't packed these bags, they weren't even familiar.

Sam removed a small, dark ball. Reaching inside again, he retrieved three more balls of various sizes. Placing them on the counter, he took a clipboard from a drawer beneath.

"Cynthia Ann Farrow: age, twenty-five; marital status: ?"

"Single," the woman replied as she fingered the front of her gown. "Almost made it, though."

"This first sphere tells me you have completed two years at Northwestern University; got good grades but didn't complete your last two years; held down your first job for three years. After that, there were four other career attempts, nothing substantial." He checked a few boxes next to categories on the printout clipped to his board.

The second ball was examined and next to the space designated "Service to Others," Sam wrote, "sufficient." The third sphere was a glimmering navy blue, and looked like an exotic baseball.

"Love. Oh, Cynthia, you have learned so much more, this time. Your love ratio is very high." He wrote, "exceptional."

Cynthia smiled, no more earthly pressures. She was safe now.

"Now for the last one. 'So far so good,' as you say."

Slowly, he turned the largest globe over and over between his hands. Its silvery mirrors captured the light, returning shooting stars to all surrounding surfaces. It was the most beautiful of all

four. Then, a frown crept over Sam's mouth.

"Vanity. You still collect a lot of superficial baggage. Wasn't that the reason for your return last time, or was it the time before?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, there's still the other bag." He tried to give the disheartened woman hope. "Go to Station Two and see what Jack can do for you. And cheer up; you couldn't wait in a nicer place."

"Cynthia, Cynthia Farrow, I thought that was you in line," said Jack, even more pleasant than Sam. "You sure pop up fast. Thought we'd seen the last of you for a while."

She remained silent as the attendant with the Burt Reynolds hair and moustache lifted her last suitcase onto the counter.

"Gosh, this one is heavy. Good sign, huh?"

Jack exposed a neat assembly of egg-shaped spheres, all of uniform size, each differently colored. The Easter Bunny would have been envious.

"Nice packing job," Jack commented. "Seems you had time to think about your trip, make preparations."

"Yes, I have been planning this trip for awhile."

"Well, let's get going, so you won't have to wait much longer."

Flashing that glamorous smile, Jack checked off his list, mumbling, "kindness, friendship, helpfulness - good, good," falling silent only when he came to the lining that concealed two, marble-sized balls.

"What are those?" Cynthia asked, nervous now.

"Patience and faith. They appear to be quite undeveloped. Sorry, Cynthia, looks like you'll have to proceed to Station Three. He closed the suitcase. "Right over there."

Cynthia caught sight of the old woman she had spoken with in line. At Station One, she was handing her purse to Sam. Opening the bag, his face smiled apapproval; the woman laughed into her soiled handkerchief.

Balls popcorned from the small bag, rolling onto the counter, the floor and behind the guard's feet. Size didn't matter, Cynthia remembered, as she walked to Station Three; size and material didn't matter.

She continued to Station Three, through a wooden, worn-out door, the golden numeral gleaming as Cynthia caught her reflection in a large "3". Chairs of green velvet, set up in three rows; the newcomer was given a number. Her suitcase - gone. Had Jack kept it? She couldn't remember.

Eighty-five was called, its corresponding personality passing, now, through a detector machine.

She had not seen him before, the small man with Coke-bottle glasses and liver-spotted head balder than an ice cube, hunched over the desk.

"Eighty-six, Cynthia Farrow, please approach the Bookkeeper."

"Cynthia," he addressed her, his magnified eyes looking into hers. "Do you know why you are here, at Station Three?"

"No."

"Insufficient baggage, my dear."

"But, I didn't pack those bags."

"You packed and unpacked them every day of your earthly existence. Do you understand? You prepared for this trip with every thought, every action, and through every person you've known."

"You mean, I'm being punished for things I didn't even know I was doing or thinking?"

"I'm sure you knew impatience, lack of faith, if your only future plans included hanging yourself."

"It wasn't my fault that David was killed. It wasn't my fault our

wedding day was less than a week away when he went through the windshield, head first. Did you check in his baggage? Did he make it inside? Where is he?"

"I'm sorry this is upsetting you so. Yes, we did check David in. No, he is not inside. But, that is not your concern. Your baggage, filled with experiences and memories, must be full enough to sustain you in this world. Unfortunately, it is insufficient."

"But, I didn't know."

"Cynthia, you'll have to go back. Try to learn patience. Trust yourself more."

"Please, if I have to go back, can't I be near David?"

"I think not."

"At least, let me start off with some hope."

"This is very irregular, but...I'll check."

Searching maps, consulting charts and graphs, the Bookkeeper nodded. "It will be done. Now, the attendants will show you to Station Four. Remember to use your time learning."

"I will," she answered, excited now, happy to be going to David.

"Thank you."

Cynthia was ushered through the detector. It buzzed as she rushed through. A matron, attending the machine, asked the puzzled bride to empty her pockets.

Reaching inside the lace panel edged with ivory ribbons, Cynthia found a pea-sized pebble.

"That's what made the buzz. Can I have it, please?"

"What is it?"

"Your memory of this place. You must start over, fresh, remembering for yourself when you next arrive. You leave here with nothing. All baggage will be reclaimed before your next check-through."

Down a corridor, to a waiting room, roses faded and Cynthia swore she smelled a hamburger. Funny, she thought, food had been such a major concern. All this time, never once had she been hungry. Now, getting ready to start over brought on growls of hunger.

The executive was seated a few feet from the departure exits, his attache case and duffle bag gone. Cynthia sat next to him.

"Are you waiting to go back?"

"Guess so. This is all new to me."

"What kind of baggage did you have?" she asked, curious.

"Heavy on hard work and energy. And, I mean heavy! That poor guy could hardly lift my case. Light on the compassion side, though. What about you?"

Before she could answer, there came the roar, the flashing of a thousand camera bulbs. She was pushed into her seat, taking off, the pressure exploding her into personalized fragments.

Silence.

Hot, dry ground was the delivery table for a small, black baby. Its mother lay, weak from the ordeal as well as from months of hunger. No cry. No congratulations. A baby was a curse in this part of the world.

As a Red Cross worker tried to assist the doctor, the mother lay, void of any feelings. The baby was lifted into blinding sunlight.

"A girl, Shakila. You have a girl. What will you name her?"

"If she lives through the week, I will decide."

"You must have faith," the doctor replied.

The White Orchard

BY

ALBERT J. MANACHINO

On the nights Rackingham is full and reflects the light of the wandering sun, Lucifer, like a giant celestial mirror, and the wind blows at the correct speed from the proper direction, mole serpents crawl out of the ground and worship at the foot of the old tree.

Appropriately, the tree is called "Mother." Not only is it the oldest and largest, but it was from her seeds the surrounding forest sprang. There is a legend it had been there before Madonna/Moloch. It grew in space and over millions of eons, attracted dust and debris till a planet formed under it. Of course, this was only legend.

The snakes gathered under the skeleton laden branches and swayed to and fro to the eerie music as it whistled and moaned through countless rib cages and rattled arm and leg bones in a macabre accompaniment. The serpents swayed back and forth sychronized to the motions of the wind-blown ossuary. This was the season of the October Hades, when the breezes unexpectedly fluctuated from a gentle zephyr to hurricane velocity and back again. The music alternated from the strains of a sensuous Bolero to the lunatic cacophony of an insane symphony. Anybody within hearing covered their ears.

In the dim past, night swine fed on the mushrooms and acorns under the tree, but in time, these food sources were depleted. Thereafter, the pigs ate all but the very largest of snakes. In turn, they were food for the tremendous leaf boas who sometimes reached lengths of fifty feet and were as big around as a man's body.

"This will be my home if I live long enough," Janet told him. Janet was a witch.

Specifically, she was the newly appointed gravekeeper of the witches. When a witch died, she was brought to Mother. Janet's title was purely semantic, as there were no graves; the departed were hung from the branches of the forest surrounding Mother.

Virgil Hood set down his cup of acorn tea and looked about the room, which originally had been a mere hollow in Mother's trunk. It had been painstakingly enlarged by countless generations of witches. Virgil knew they had only the most primitive of hand tools to work with. Despite this handicap, the witches gouged out a large comfortable room, but it must have taken hundreds of years. The room now included such refinements as windows and a fireplace. He glanced out the windows at the swaying skeletons.

"Who places them in the branches?"

"As gravekeeper, that will be my function," she replied, "if I survive." This was the second reference to her possible demise.

He noted her fragile body. "You don't look strong enough to lift a cadaver."

Janet was barely five feet tall and as slender as a willow rod. Virgil doubted she weighed one hundred pounds.

"They aren't placed in the branches immediately," she told him. "First, there are purification rites. The decedents are hung on kites and spend several weeks in the sky till the pie birds pick them clean. Jake does all the heavy work."



"Jake?"

"He's my familiar." She pointed to the strangest bird Virgil had ever seen.

It was sleeping on the back of a chair. He had mistaken it for a bizarre totem created of twisted branches. The feathers looked as if they'd been selected at random from a stuffed pillow and glued haphazardly on the contorted frame. The scrofulous gray wings were folded against a naked abdomen in imitation of a well-fed deacon. The wingtips terminated in fingers, which were clasped below the bird's naval. A small flower blossomed in the cavity. It exceeded even the bizarre standards of Modonna/Moloch. Jake emitted a snore.

"I fasten the bodies to the kites, he gets them airborne," Janet explained.

Virgil's personal curiosity overcame his professional discipline.

"How do you know when a 'candidate' is ready? I take it, pulling them down for personal inspection and then lifting them again if they are not ready, is arduous work."

"I can use a telescope or Jake goes aloft and looks at them or I can fly up on my broom. We can communicate by gestures. For instance, if he holds his beak, I know the cadaver isn't ready."

She informed him that Jake was a bagpipe bird to whom someone in the past had arbitrarily given a masculine name. To her knowledge, he had never laid an egg. During the lonely hours, of which there were many, Janet diverted herself by blowing through Jake's feet and fingering the holes in his beak. That the resulting music was of less than operatic caliber was immaterial. It served as a passtime.

"You twice mentioned the possibility of not surviving to assume your functions as gravekeeper. Why do you think you may not?"

"All the previous gravekeepers for the past fifty years have vanished. I'm sure none of the disappearances were premeditated -- there were no notes, no evidence of hasty departure, all personal belongings were left in this room."

"That does seem to eliminate robbery as a possibility." Virgil went to a window. He noticed many ropes tied to the nearer branches. They rose sharply and disappeared into the clouds. The effect was that of an immense aerial spiderweb that moved convulsively with the breezes. She noted his curiosity.

"Yes, there are a number of 'candidates' in preparation. Unfinished business from the gravekeeper before me."

He shuddered. "If you will pardon an opinion, this is an excessively morbid atmosphere. A young person like you should be closer to the hub of social activities."

"I'm a witches' gravekeeper."

"You are missing the more normal of associations -- family life, friends..."

She interrupted. "You know we're different. We don't reproduce like you humans. Consequently, we do not miss what you term 'family life'."

Virgil knew there were no male witches. The females were impregnated by witch warts -- a growth that came to a head after pollination and then broke free of the parent flower. Driven by the wind that never ceased on Madonna/Moloch, they bounded along like miniscule tumble weeds till they found a receptive witch. Human women were immune to them. Those witches not wishing to propagate protected themselves with variegated salts.

"When did the last keeper disappear?"

"On the twenty-second of Bedgoblin -- give a day or two. We are supposed to hoist a bedsheet every morning. It can be seen by an

observer on Frogfruit Mountain. If there is no bedsheet, the observer knows something is wrong. But, some of the former keepers, I am told, sometimes neglected to bring the sheet down at night. It would be there flying in the morning, creating an impression all was well when in actuality, the poor keeper had met her fate."

"The keeper before that?"

"She disappeared on Thistle the seventh."

"Hmm. Both during the October Hades. The others, did they too disappear during this season?"

"Yes, to my knowledge."

Virgil fingered his chin thoughtfully. "Then, during the Hades, something must occur, something peculiar to the vanishings that does not happen at other times of the year."

"Rackingham is full," she pointed out.

"Amnesia created by a full moon, the keepers wander away... It isn't plausible."

"The wind blows more violently during the Hades."

"I hadn't noticed."

"That's because this is a lull. Wait till halfnight."

"Even so, I fail to see what the wind has to do with the missing witches unless they were blown away."

"Even if they had been blown to a far land, they would have returned. Witches fly, you know... With or without brooms. If Jake could only talk."

"Why Jake?"

"He's always dwelt in this tree. He had been familiar to everyone from the first keeper to me."

Virgil studied the still sleeping bird. "So, at least we have a link. What happened to your own familiar?"

"A witch can only be served by one familiar. Jake ate it."

He shuddered. "Can we communicate with Jake? You mentioned gestures."

"We can try, but the exchange of information would be limited. In any event, we'd have to wait till halfnight. It's impossible to awaken him till then."

"Truthfully, I hoped to be gone by then."

Twilight had fallen. Rackingham shown brilliantly. The wind was beginning to pick up and the skeletons stirred uneasily.

"I don't think you'll be able to get through, Mr. Hood."

Virgil looked downward. "I had no trouble getting here. I couldn't possibly get lost, it's as bright as day."

"The mole serpents are rising, they're gathering under the tree."

Virgil saw that what he had mistaken for fallen twigs and branches were in motion.

"Some of them are deadly poisonous," she continued. "You aren't a witch so you can't fly over them."

Reluctantly, he decided to remain. "It appears you will have an overnight guest on your hands."

"You won't inconvenience me in the least. You can have the bed. I'll sleep in Jake's nest." She explained when she saw his expression.

"The nest is very large and comfortable. Jake seldom uses it and we store supplies in it. I've already slept there on a couple of warm nights. Jake can perch on the rim, it doesn't matter to him where he sleeps."

The breezes were picking up and Virgil heard the first strains of the macabre symphony he would experience all night. Jake muttered something in his throat and exchanged feet on the back of the chair.

"If the wind increases, the matter of sleep will be academic," he

decided.

"It will lull toward dawn. I haven't been able to remain awake one night yet."

Jake spread a wing and yawned. He scratched his navel.

"He'll go out and catch my supper," Janet said. "You can question him later."

"It's very late." Virgil looked around. He saw no sign of food preparation.

"Jake will catch us a mess of grass legs. He won't take very long." The familiar launched himself out the window like a javelin. "He'll be back in fifteen minutes," she predicted.

They were seated at the table when Jake returned. The familiar carried a bucket in his claws. He flapped around the ceiling and settled on the table facing Janet. She opened her mouth wide and leaned back. Jake dipped his beak into the pail and drew it out full of wiggling green crawlers. Then he thrust his beak down her throat. When he withdrew it, the crawlers were gone. Virgil was unable to tear his eyes away from the bizarre feeding, though he longed to.

"Delicious, Jake," she complimented the bird. "Would you care to try some, Mr. Hood?"

"No, thank you. I ate before I came."

He watched till they finished. The attempt to communicate with Jake was unsuccessful. The idea of asking what had happened to the previous gravekeepers was too complicated for the familiar's simple brain.

"The witches disappeared, Jake has not. Why?" Virgil examined the familiar. The parts of him visible under the feathers appeared to be made of canvas. He scratched the bird's stomach and felt the rough texture of sailcloth. The flower in his navel was merely embroidery. Virgil looked closer. The beak was of bamboo, the eyes of broken glass.

"He isn't alive...not as you and I. I take it he is motivated by magic?"

"Of course," Janet agreed. "Most familiars are not alive. Jake was formed of odds and ends by Mother Geppetto, the first gravekeeper. She was very lovely."

"In itself, that's a clue. Apparently, whatever happens, happens only to the living. Jake is more in the nature of house furnishings."

"What does that suggest?"

"Food. Who or what feeds on witches?"

Janet paled. "The John Barleythorn. They catch and bake witches in pies." Her face cleared. "But, they're ground-level demons and can't climb trees, steps even. And all witches carry this protective amulet." She showed him a small doll whose handcrafted smile terminated in murderous fangs. It hung from her girdle and appeared to be made of braided hair. "No John Barleythorn has ever been able to overcome one."

"Something has been able to overcome the witches defenses. I would suggest you bring to bear all your magic to protect yourself with during the sleeping hours."

"I will cast a protective pentagram around the perimeter of this room. You will be safe."

"What about yourself? How can you cast a protective pentagram around a nest in the branches of a tree? Evidently, Jake is no protection at all unless..." His voice trailed off into silence as a thought struck him. Virgil pointed to the familiar. "He's been here since the disappearance of the first witch. What kind of a person was Mother Geppetto?"

"Those who knew her say she was somewhat retarded, very low intelligence. But with a natural aptitude for magic."

"Was she malevolent?"

"No. The poor creature was barely able to provide for her personal needs. I'm sure she wouldn't have been able to differentiate between a deliberately unkind deed... well, anything that would call for vengeance and something that was done to her accidentally. Mother Geppetto had no friends, no one associated with her because she was not only retarded, but ugly and helpless. She was too absorbed in keeping body and soul together to become involved with curses. She became the first gravekeeper simply because no one else wanted the job."

Virgil asked. "If she was so incompetent, how did she learn the 'functions of office'?"

"I'm sure a committee of witches spent much time with her. Even house pets can learn simple tricks by rote."

"But records of the burials...they would be more than perfunctory, would they not?"

There were no records kept then, there are none now. All she had to do was find a vacant spot on a limb and fasten the body to it. The cloud purification rites came later. We have no markers, so it is impossible to tell one skeleton from another."

"How did Jake come to learn the process with which he assisted every subsequent gravekeeper...the food gathering...the kite inspections?"

"I'm certain his training took place at the hands of successive keepers. As his creator, Mother Geppetto would not have needed to train him. All that was needed was to make her wishes known to him."

"How certain are you that Jake falls asleep when you do?"

"I'm sure nothing can withstand the lullaby of the Hades wind. You humans have a nursery rhyme... 'Rockabye baby, in the tree top. When the wind blows the cradle will rock...' and so it is with us. The wind rocks us to sleep. You will see."

"But Jake isn't a truly living organism. He was created of odds and ends by magic. His awareness is not the same as ours, the wind and music might not affect him at all."

"I can't say for certain he goes to sleep. However, quite often, he is still asleep when I awaken but I cannot verify if he went to sleep immediately after I did. I don't think Jake is in any way responsible for the disappearances. Remember, I've slept safely several nights since my arrival."

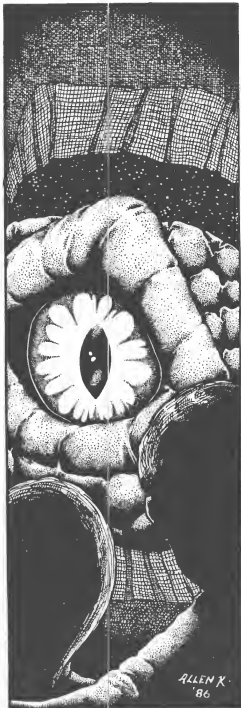
"What other possibility is there to account for them, then, now that you've eliminated the John Barleythorns and Jake?"

Janet was looking past him at the window. Rackingham shone with an intensity seldom equalled during the Hades. His gleam lighted the little room almost as brightly as day. A pot of water boiled merrily over the fire. The wind was picking up, moans and rattles of the skeletons had risen so that conversation had evolved into a shouting match. Janet screamed.

Virgil spun around. He was barely in time to glimpse two gleaming red eyes that jerked away. The head was a monstrous silhouette. Branches cracked and broke as an enormous weight glided over them. From the window he saw the terrible coils of a colossal snake as they slithered to the ground. Janet trembled at his side, and his arm went protectively around her shoulders.

"What is it?"

"A leaf boa. I should have thought of them when you made that



comment about witches being food for something. I was so wrapped up in the magical danger I never thought of the physical one. All those poor witches, casting spells to protect themselves against sorcery and all the time it was a..."

"That thing must have been over eighty feet long. It wouldn't have any trouble crawling into this room, swallowing a sleeping witch and then crawling away without leaving a trace."

"Do you think it will return?" She shuddered.

"I don't know. How can we protect ourselves? I have no weapons."

"Nor do I. I don't know what good they'll do us once we're asleep."

"We must remain awake. If it comes to the window again, we can drive it away by thrusting burning torches into its face. Tomorrow, I will try to bar the windows with branches. Do you have any wax?"

"Of course. All witches use wax to make images with."

"Quickly, let me have some. I remember a story where, once, the master of a ship was able to pass a dangerous shoal by sealing his crew's ears so that they could not hear the music played by a sorceress who was attempting to lure them onto dangerous rocks."

She brought him the wax. "I'll join you if you don't mind."

They began to roll the wax into pellets which they stuffed into their ears. Jake was showing signs of drowsiness.

"Virgil, do you think that snake will go to sleep?" It was the first time she had addressed him other than as "Mr. Hood."

"I wouldn't count on it. Their auditory systems are different. Some say snakes



don't hear, that they can only feel vibrations."

The wind had risen so that the skeletons snapped wildly on the ends of their ropes. Under its orchestrating fingers, a distinctly recognizable cadence was forming. A crazed ensemble tuning for a lunatic symphony. Virgil felt the drowsiness seeping into his mind. Frantically, he pressed more wax into his ears.

Janet's notions slowed and stopped. She stared vacantly into space and then slumped to her knees. Virgil saw her slide to the floor. His system responded to the demented strains; sleep tugged at his brain.

In a panic he stumbled to the fireplace and thrust his left hand into the boiling water. A searing pain drove the lethargy out of his system. He waved the hand frantically to alleviate the torment.

The agony revitalized him. With his uninjured hand, he continued to stuff wax into his ears. The new wax further reduced the level of the mesmeric noise, pain drove away his torpor. Janet slept on the floor. Virgil would still have to exercise will power not to succumb. He placed the ends of several branches into the fire and watched them ignite. If he could remain awake he was confident he could deal with the snake.

Jake flared into life. Muttering excitedly, he hopped down from his chair perch and ran in circles, gobbling to himself. He halted over the recumbent Janet. The familiar took one of her arms in his right foot and raised it. He dropped it. The bird seemed puzzled. Fascinated, Virgil forgot about the leaf boa and watched. Jake extended a fingertipped wing and shook her legs and dropped them. Next he seized her by the ankles and

dragged her about the room. Jake rolled the witch over several times. It was evident to Virgil the bird was trying to awaken her.

He formed his beak into a tube and blew a sharp, resounding blast into her ear. Janet remained motionless. The familiar clasped his wings behind his back and trotted in a circle around his mistress. He was muttering things to himself that were indecipherable to Virgil.

"He's giving up," Virgil thought.

Jake stormed out of the room. Virgil heard him tugging at something outside. He crossed the room and looked out the window. The familiar had hauled down one of the huge kites that kept the bodies aloft until picked clean by the pie birds. He was unfastening the occupant. Virgil watched him drag the skeleton away by a rope fastened around its neck. Jake found a vacant spot. He secured the skeleton to the branch and kicked it out into space.

The familiar went to a huge leaf and grass hummock Virgil recognized as a nest, presumably the one Janet slept in on hot nights. Jake returned with a rope, one with its end already formed into a noose. Jake slipped the noose around Janet's neck and drew it tight. Then he began to drag her out of the room. Under the influence of the hypnotic music, she continued to sleep. Belatedly, Virgil understood.

He took one of the burning branches out of the fire and touched it to Jake's feathers. The bird, being composed of wax and canvas and other inflammables, ignited at once. The fiery ball that was Jake squawked twice and plunged off the branch to the ground below.

"Forgive me, Jake."

He loosened the noose from Janet's neck but didn't remove it. At the time Lucifer began to compete with Rackingham as the heavenly host, the wind diminished and the hypnotic quality of the symphony vanished. Virgil explained to her.

"You lay motionless on the floor and he could not awaken you. Evidently, the music did not affect him. Jake thought you were dead. His training asserted itself and he began to perform the purification rite. Mother Geppetto and the others taught him well."

She fingered the noose still around her neck. "No wonder none of the missing witches were ever found. They would have been totally unrecognizable after a few days aloft. No one ever thought of looking there for them."

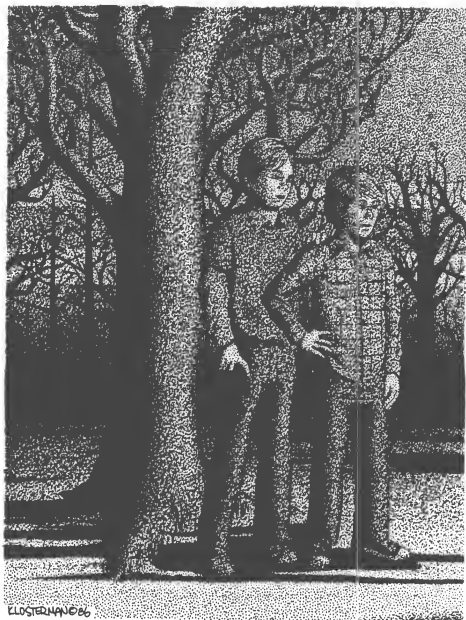
Virgil was sorry for her. Her existence would be lonelier than ever now. "I suppose you'll be busy for a while creating another familiar."

"Yes. Thank you for saving my life, Virgil. You're the only human who has ever stood by me."

Her shoulders slumped and a flood of cockroaches streamed out of her eyes. Witches did not cry as ordinary humans.



Editor's note: If you enjoyed this Madonna/Moloch tale by Al, then you will be happy to hear that "Night on Madonna/Moloch" was published in ARGONAUT NO. 11, and another "Madonna/Moloch" tale will be published in ARGONAUT NO. 14. Thank you Mike and Al!



THE LAST LAUGH

BY

KEVIN SPEIRS

Tall lamp-posts cast an infinite number of long shadows, two of which glided, precisely matching the movements of a pair of boys walking down a sparsely populated, residential road. They could've been mistaken for any other kids out on Halloween night -- except for their lack of costume. And they had walked two miles without so much as even approaching a front door.

Terry led Jim farther from both their houses. Occasionally, they would pause when they came to an intersection, and Jim would ask, "This one?"

Terry would study the intruding street with great concentration, unknown thoughts racing through his head until he reached a decision. Until now, he'd replied, "too many houses," or "my parents know someone who lives on this street," and he'd continue walking, confident they'd find just what he wanted.

Thick groves of trees sprouting between each house became larger and more concentrated the farther they traveled, while the homes became scarcer. It was as if the dwellings had been swallowed up, this far from the center of town, leaving a feeling of uncertainty of whether the city expanded into the forested areas, or the forest fed and advanced on the outskirts of the city.

They found the unpaved side road amid the dense tree growth, cutting a jagged line through the foliage. The road was posted with a yellow, black-lettered sign, proclaiming "DEAD END."

"This is perfect," Terry said excitedly. "There's only one house down there, and not another house near here, except that one." He pointed towards the dimly-glowing window of a house three blocks distant.

It was, indeed, perfect. The two boldly made their way toward the lone house, concealed by the absence of streetlights. Their Halloween fun was about to begin.

Terry had conceived their plan for the night. He'd always had a desire to frighten someone on Halloween. After all, what good was the holiday, unless you went trick-or-treating? And both he and Jim had outgrown that. It had started when Terry had a strange notion while washing dishes one night. He loathed the nights when it was his turn to clear the dinner table and wash everything. Usually, he let his mind wander to reduce the drudgery of the task.

It had been dark outside, and Terry had envisioned himself casually looking up from the soapy water. He imagined his gaze being greeted by a pale face, bearing an insanely forlorn expression, pressed against the window. When he actually did look up, he saw only his own reflection staring back innocently. Almost too innocently, in fact, as though it knew of dark things lurking about outside but refused to let on.

From that day on, Terry thought it strange that kitchen sinks were always below and facing a window, as if positioned that way for some devious purpose. Not only that, it was impossible to see anything on the outside at night -- unless it came close enough to touch -- due to the lights from inside. Whatever was outside would have the

advantage. Somehow, he knew such knowledge would come in handy.

Terry had also wondered about the usefulness of his witch-laugh. Without quite knowing why, he practiced his laugh incessantly. At home, his high-pitched cackle echoed throughout the vacant rooms when his parents were absent. He liked the way it chilled the deathly silence, bringing visions of haunted houses he'd seen in movies. Other times, he managed a screeching laugh while walking home from school with Jim. The absorption effect of the wide open spaces also pleased him.

But, what use was it?

At the time Terry first thought of these things, he mentally stored them for possible future use -- until the stockpiled data accidentally intermixed, one October afternoon, forming what he thought was nothing less than a brilliant idea. They could haunt someone on Halloween.

The people living in the isolated house were to be the victims. Unsuspecting, they were oblivious to the knowledge that their seclusion was ideal for what Terry had in mind.

Terry softly sang, "a-haunting we will go, a-haunting we will go, hi-ho the derry-o, a-haunting we will go." His close-cropped, blond hair ruffled in the breeze like a month-old field of wheat.

"Shh," Jim whispered. He was already having second thoughts, especially since it would be his dark curly hair and whitish face the people would see pressed flat against their window. He half-wished he could talk Terry out of this prank now, but he knew anything he said would be in vain. Instead, he earnestly hoped the people would be startled enough by the whole experience to forget his face. Already, he had visions of a composite police sketch of his head appearing in tomorrow's newspaper.

"Why are you worrying?" Terry asked. "We're half a block away. They can't possibly hear us, yet." But he didn't sing again.

They crept silently as spectres up the driveway of the unsuspecting house, Terry wordlessly thanking the moon for being dark this night. Gravel crunched under their sneakers, squeezing into the rubber soles. Surrounding the house were several large trees grasping towards its exterior, behind which the two boys slowly moved, looking for the desired spot. They peered around each trunk, hands lightly pressed against the bark.

After a quick search around the dwelling, they discovered a lighted kitchen window conveniently located near a large bush. Terry and Jim crawled into the bush and reworked their plan. They decided to escape separately, through the dense forest behind the house, in hopes that older people wouldn't chase them through the rough country. Assured all would proceed favorably, they waited for someone to approach the window. Their hearts beat a frantic pattern.

As time passed, an ugly thought entered Terry's head. What if these people owned a dog? That was certainly something they hadn't considered. What if it was too cunning to bark and stalked them at this very moment, its muscular body creeping closer, teeth bared with what could only be called a sly expression? Then he saw it behind Jim.

It was huge, with unforgiving steely-black eyes and white, glistening fangs that drooled forward from a dark throat stretching into oblivion. Terry found he couldn't swallow; his mouth was dry as a fallen autumn leaf. His tongue felt twice its normal size.

The dog's figure became translucent and wavering, then it seemed to evaporate.

Unable to move, Terry listened for telltale sounds but heard only the light wind rustling through the trees. It must have been the

darkness playing tricks on his eyes, he told himself. Still unsure, he kept his mind occupied by nervously drawing figures in the dirt. Even though it was dark, he didn't dare look at Jim - he might have revealed his unease.

A woman, dressed in a black cloak, pointed hat, and gruesome face paint, approached the window, carrying a large stack of glasses and plates.

Terry was immediately reminded of his mother, who had dressed as a witch for Halloween a few years before and dressed as a clown this year. She had always said everyone ought to get into the spirit of the occasion, whether old or young. And, even though she wouldn't approve of their methods, what they were doing tonight was getting into the spirit of the occasion. Still, he wondered if many trick-or-treaters came to the edge of town, enough to encourage the woman to wear a costume. It was a long walk for a piece of candy. Jim happened to be thinking the same thing, leading to a brief, hushed conversation between them.

Terry secretly thought the coincidence between the lady's costume and his about-to-be-used witch laugh was extremely funny, or a strange form of poetic justice, at any rate. While the correlation was also apparent to Jim, the effect was opposite. He was inwardly disturbed, but refused to let Terry know.

Hearing the muffled sound of water forcefully spilling into the sink, they soon realized the woman was going to wash the dishes. Her head angled downward as she became engrossed in her work. Terry motioned for Jim to position himself under the window and get ready for action. The night's festivities were about to begin.

Jim crawled to the outer wall, now wishing he hadn't agreed to help carry out the plan. They could both be home watching television in a warm room instead of pulling a prank. But here he was, trespassing, sneaking up on some strangers' house and trying to scare them. He felt so exposed and vulnerable here, the unfamiliar surroundings only adding to his anxiety. Still, he couldn't back out now. Crouching below the kitchen window, he waited for Terry to signal him. His limbs nervously quivered, as if the air were colder outside of the bush.

Terry pointed at Jim, loudly whispering, "Now!"

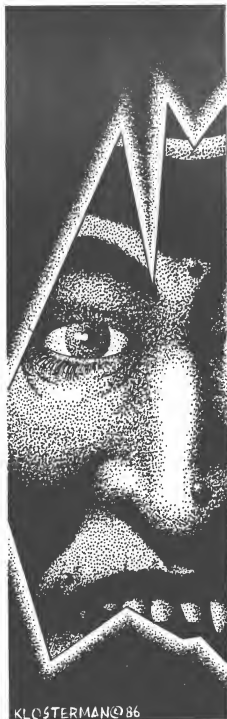
Jim raised up, pressing his face against the window. Behind him, Terry released the witch laugh, breaking the silence with such force that Jim almost jumped.

The costumed woman's head jerked up, not with a shocked expression, but with a malicious, almost feral aspect, her eyes flickering as though aflame. Because of Jim's proximity to her he could see features not evident from any other perspective.

Her face was rough and deeply lined suggesting incredible age. An impression of unearthly cold emanated from her deathly white skin, as if warm blood never flowed through the veins it concealed.

Jim gazed in terror at her misshapen face, which had pointed teeth and a wart or its hooked nose, just like the witch he'd seen on display in the drugstore. Her rotting teeth parted as she hissed through the screen, and the air about him dipped noticeably in temperature, as though her breath were icy cold.

Her hand shattered the window with lightning speed and grasped Jim by the neck. She pressed into the soft skin, impressions forming beneath each finger. Blood seeped out around her fingertails, filling each indentation, then spilled over the edges, thickly forming small streams down his chest. She yanked him off the ground and through the window; shards of broken glass cut his clothes and skin. Then she



KLOSTERMAN©86

plunged his head into the soapy water with unyielding force.

Jim felt a burning pain in his stomach, where a large piece of glass rested. An attempted scream was rewarded with a mouthful of water. A sense of urgency grew in him; he craved for air. But his efforts were waning and slight.

Terry gaped in disbelief, too shocked for any reaction, save a glassy stare as he watched Jim struggle unsuccessfully with the iron grip of the witch drowning him in dirty dishwater.

Then, she looked skyward and laughed, shaking her head. She laughed so maniacally that Terry's poor imitation seemed ludicrous in comparison. The air was thick with the awful, highpitched chuckle; it shook the ground, as if unleashed from the bowels of the earth.

A horrible feeling was transmitted to Terry, like the knowledge that something long dead had suddenly awakened.

The laugh changed while he still stared, his eyes wide. It became lower in tone and warped, like a recording suddenly switched to a slower speed, sounding even more unnatural than before. Then it quickly reversed, speeding up to a piercing shriek that writhed in his ears like a snake, sinking fangs into his brain. And, as his support wobbled, he saw a distorted view of the woman inside: a housewife screaming, terrified by the scene that lay before her.

A wave of nausea overwhelmed his stomach, and he lurched to his knees, clutching his quivering midriff. His internal organs seemed to crawl about, as if they disapproved of their original position. How long he lay doubled over with his vision blurred, he wasn't sure. But, when the pain had subsided a little, he

felt the strength to look up.

Jim's legs hung limply toward the ground, a feeling of complete lifelessness emanating from them as they swung slowly back and forth. Their tedious movement cast a faint shadow on the red brick wall.

Inside, barely able to keep any semblance of calmness, a man stood next to the woman, consoling her, trying to persuade her away from the bloody sight. Together, they looked like any ordinary, middle-aged couple who had recently found a dead body thrust through their window.

The woman was in shock; the man's attempts to move her by the shoulders were unsuccessful. Then the man spotted Terry on the lawn outside, and he gathered his senses enough to point an accusing finger while yelling about getting a gun. Watching nervously for any movement by Terry, he carried the woman from the kitchen, shouting that he was going to call the police.

The scent of grass completely returned Terry's awareness as the green blades tickled his nostrils. He tried to stand, but he still felt dizzy and had to crouch near the ground again, clutching his stomach. Strangely disoriented, he felt unsure about what had transpired during the past hour. An urge to run, to get away from trouble, overcame him. But he succeeded only in rising weakly on all fours, crawling desperately into the trees as fast as possible.

Rocks and protruding tree roots bruised his knees and speared the palms of his hands like dull knives; the tall grass and dead leaves offered little protection. Eventually, he felt he could stand, and he ran blindly, further into the woods. Finding it difficult to keep his balance, he pushed against the foliage that leaned at weird angles, attempting to propel himself forward. Leaves were dark blotches of spattered paint; trees were blurred and bent out of shape, scratching his exposed skin and tearing at his clothes. Gravity seemed to pull from the wrong direction. Sometimes, he would find he was staring at the sky and realize he had fallen onto his back and lain there for an unknown length of time, after which he would continue his flight through the blurred, strangely lurching surroundings.

Something grabbed his foot, flinging him face first into a stagnant pond. The cold water took his breath away; the filth floating on its surface covered his face like a lumpy map. He gasped for air, getting a mouthful of wretched water instead. As he pushed his head above the waist-high surface, something hairy found its way into his mouth. Rapidly panting in desperation, he wiped madly at his face and mouth while splashing frantically, trying to exit the pool.

Once on shore, Terry felt somewhat safe and then silly when he realized he'd panicked from a mouthful of his own hair. He sat down on the bank of the pond, leaning against a tree trunk, chest heaving as he joyfully regained his breath. His vision steadied; the surroundings returned to normal.

After he'd calmed, he began to wonder where he was and just what business he had in being there. He remembered being at someone's house earlier, but for what purpose, he wasn't certain. All he knew was that he'd had a bad scare and didn't want to go back. He would stay in the protection of the forest as long as he needed to. Here, he could safely hide from pursuers. His head dipped forward to rest; damp hair caressed his chest.

An uneasiness crawled into his heart as he looked at the hair hanging over his shoulders -- hair that couldn't possibly be his. As he reached out to feel if the long, slovenly strands were his own, he saw the ancient, claw-like hand attached to his arm. With a whimper, he jerked up his other hand. The two were a perfect match of cracked gray skin and deformity. In a panic, Terry pushed himself over the

edge of the now tranquil pond, holding his hair out of his eyes, and stared at his reflection.

At first, he choked back a gasp of disbelief, but then some facts raced through his head: it was hours past dusk, there was no moon in the sky tonight, and he was miles from any light of the city. Yet, the reflection of his malformed witch-face still stared back at him as if brilliantly lit. The mournful, siren-like wail rose from his throat as he realized he could see perfectly in the utter blackness of the nighttime forest, and he felt himself lose all control of mind and body.



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New Blood ...

Please, take a close look at the enclosed, NEW BLOOD insert. Don't miss the semi-pro, December '87 release! It looks to be an exciting event for the field!!

Possum

BY

BENTLEY LITTLE

We didn't get near enough money from welfare to pay for heating, and Grandpa died in the early part of February. He froze solid in the woodshed and Mama went kind of crazy and wouldn't let us bury him. Daddy was gone, working on the pipeline, and Mama wouldn't take no argument from us. She wouldn't even listen.

I didn't mind much, though. It was kind of nice having Grandpa around, even if he was dead. He'd been sitting down when he died, resting or something, and he was froze into the old, swaybacked chair that Mama'd kicked out of the house last summer, and Duane and I would sit at his feet and talk to him. Even though he never talked back, it made us feel better, and we would sit in there for hours with him, chattering away.

I doubt many people outside the family would've understood. But Possum did. He used to come by and sit with us for awhile at Grandpa's feet and talk to him, just like we did. Even though we never got tired of talking to Grandpa, we did run out of things to say to him. And then Possum would start talking to us. Possum was lucky: his mama and daddy didn't care nothing about him, so he got to wander around and do whatever he wanted--even in winter. Our mama wouldn't even let us leave the house after the snows came, and the only news we had from town came from Possum. I'm not complaining. It's nice to have a mama that cares about you. But a lot of times I just wished that Mama would let up a bit, or that I had parents like Possum's.

It was Possum who told us that Old Man Crawford, who owned the bait and tackle shop out by the lake, was sick pretty bad and might not make it through the winter. The doctor thought it might be cancer, Possum said, and there was talk of moving him to Atlanta to the hospital.

Possum told us, too, that Mr. and Mrs. O'Neill were finally splitting up. We were surprised to hear it, but only because we'd thought neither one of them would ever have the nerve to leave the other. Those two had been fighting and screaming and arguing and throwing things ever since they got married, and it was a miracle they had lasted together as long as they had. As usual, Possum took credit for the whole thing, telling us that he talked Mr. O'Neill into finally putting his foot down. Duane and I took that one with a grain of salt. To hear Possum tell it, everything that happened, either in the town or in the hills or along the lake or on the farms, he had something to do with. He never seemed to realize that he was a kid, just like we were, and that grownups never pay no attention to kids and that we knew it. He just kept telling us what happened and lying and making a part for himself in it.

It was weird; Mama didn't mind me and Duane going into the woodshed and talking to Grandpa (she even did it herself, sometimes) but she didn't like us hanging around Possum. She couldn't stand him, for some reason. "I don't like him," she told us once. "I don't care how much you think of him. And I don't want you inviting him over here. I will not have him in my house. Is that understood?"

Duane and I both nodded yes, but neither of us meant it. After that, we'd just meet Possum in the trees at the edge of our property,



or we'd go to his house or something. Then, when Grandpa died and Mama went kind of crazy, she didn't seem to notice him anymore, and we had him come over and visit Grandpa in the woodshed with us. A couple times, we even went into the kitchen to get some hot cocoa and Mama didn't even say anything.

Then the weather warmed up a little. It stopped snowing, though the snow stayed on the ground, and Mama seemed to get a little better, seemed to be more her old self.

It was a Saturday morning and Duane and I had finished doing our chores around the kitchen and went off to the storage shed to tell Grandpa of the morning's events. Possum joined us a little later, coming in from across the field instead of taking the road route, and he told us how he had helped Junior Campbell to sell the load of wood he'd been trying to dump all winter to old Mrs. Montgomery. All of a sudden, the door to the woodshed flew open, a spray of old snowflakes, propelled by the force of the wind, spattering onto Grandpa's frozen face.

Mama stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the midmorning sun. She had a broom in her hand.

"I told you I didn't want you bringing that thing around here," she said, walking quickly toward Possum, broom raised. "They carry disease."

She hit him with the straw end of the broom, and the fur on his back flattened. He cringed and tried to duck between her legs and scurry out the door. We could hear his ragged breathing and the scuttling of his paws, but he didn't say anything.

"I swear to God, I'm going to have to start setting traps if you two don't knock this off." She tried to hit him again, missed, and he ran out the door.

I was mad and I stood up. "Possum's our friend," I said.

"I will not have you playing with rodents. Play with Duane."

"I like Possum, too," Duane said.

She shook her broom at us like it was her finger. "If I see that thing around here again, I'm going to set a trap for it, do you hear me?" She looked around the woodshed, her eyes resting on Grandpa. "And we're going to have to bury him, too. It's starting to warm up now, and pretty soon he won't be frozen anymore and he'll start to rot."

She turned and stalked out the door.

Duane and I looked at each other, not speaking. Possum slunk back in the door. "Sorry," Duane said. "I don't know what got into her."

Possum scooted next to me. "Just ignore her," I said.

He looked up at me, his eyes staring into mine. "It's too late for that. She wants to get rid of me and--" he motioned toward my Grandpa, sitting stiffly in his chair, "--she wants to bury him."

I glanced toward my grandpa. I'd got used to him this way. I liked the way his mouth was fixed in a permanent, unmoving sort of half-smile and the way he looked at me whenever I talked to him. I liked the blue/grey kind of color of his skin. And I didn't want to lose him. I felt a sudden rush of anger at Mama. I looked back at Possum. "Well, what can we do about it?"

"Yeah," Duane said.

He looked at both of us, and a weird sort of expression crossed his face. He kind of smiled, but not really. "Remember what I told Joey to do with his Daddy?" he said.

I shook my head. I knew what he said he told Joey, but I shook my head because I didn't want to hear what he was going to say next. Duane was plugging his ears.

Possum grinned, and his voice was real low. "She has to go," he said. "We have to get rid of her."

I got used to the idea after a few days. So did Duane. And we started planning.

At first, Possum wanted us to pour gasoline or something all over the house and then set fire to it, so that Mama would burn up, but I told him that then we wouldn't have any place to live. He said we could live at his house, but even though his place was all right for visiting, I wouldn't want to live there. And I don't think his parents would've liked it, either.

We decided to poison her.

Possum brought us some stuff a few days later. Rat poison. He said he got it from Old Man Crawford's store. It was probably the same thing Mama would've used to get rid of Possum.

Duane put it on her cereal.

Possum was waiting outside, watching everything through the window, and when she had eaten half of the cereal, he came inside. "What--?" she began, then coughed. "What is that creature doing here? I told you..." Her face changed, going from normal to red to white. She looked at me, her mouth open, and started to choke. For a second, I was sorry, I felt guilty, and I wanted to run out and get some help. But then Possum started chuckling and I looked at her and she did look kind of funny. She had kicked over her chair by this time and was on the floor on her hands and knees. She was throwing up and red stuff was coming out of her mouth. It looked like blood.

Possum was laughing and laughing. Mama looked at him and he said something to her real low, but I couldn't hear it. She tried to move away, but her arms gave out and she fell onto the floor, on her face. Possum just kept laughing.

After she was dead, we dragged her out to the woodshed and propped her up next to Grandpa. It had warmed up a little, but not much, and after a day or so the blood on her face was completely frozen and her face had turned a little grey.

Possum kicked me and Duane out of the woodshed. "Let me take care of it," he said.

We went and made some sandwiches and then came back in. Mama looked pretty and happy and good as life. Possum was grinning proudly. "She should stay until the last thaw's over," he said.

Both me and Duane sat down on the floor, between Grandpa and Mama. Possum sat next to us.

And we talked away the rest of the afternoon.

— — — **BR** — — —

*Heh, check out the flyers and ads
in this issue concerning other
small press magazines. They all
come highly recommended!*

Joe

Show of Death

BY

CLINTON LAWRENCE

Norgen tried to shove his way through the crowd to speak with the man he had just seen resurrected. Those in front of him refused to part, however, determined to pay the man for the wonderful show and the tale which he brought back from Drimmith, land of the dead.

The crowd slowly moved forward as those in the very front left the scene after dropping coins into the open chest owned by the performer. Norgen grew impatient at the progress he was making. He had to know the man's secret, since he had an errand to perform in Drimmith which required his return to the living in Bandallo. He tried to recall the performer's name, finally remembering that it was Sarvel.

Soon, the crowd seemed to move more rapidly toward the center of the plaza, where the show had been staged. He could not understand why, at first, but he was grateful. Then, the crowd before him parted, and he saw that the center of the plaza was empty. Sarvel and his assistant had gone, their chest filled with rewards, and no sign of the performance remained. Dejectedly, Norgen turned from the plaza and began walking home, hoping for still another chance to meet Sarvel.

#

Sarvel scooped a handful of coins from their full chest and let them flow through his fingers, cherishing the sound they made as they fell back into the chest.

"I think it is time to invest in another chest, Pomill," he said, looking up at his manager.

"I think you are correct, Sarvel. Had we another, we could easily have doubled our income from this show."

Pomill watched Sarvel as the performer continued to fondle his receipts.

"I think we might even need two more chests, since we won't be able to spend all this before our next show," Sarvel added to his previous assessment.

"Agreed," Pomill replied. "I also think we should perform a few more times here in Maufrim. Besides, we don't even know yet where we're going next."

"You think we could make more money in Maufrim?"

"Sarvel, you saw how the crowd loved your performance. And you noticed that our receipts are growing too large for our present capacity for storage. It has happened only here." Pomill paused to consider his next words. "Maufrim is the largest city that we have ever performed in. That crowd today was only a fraction of the potential audience here. We can just move through the city, collecting all we want, and we don't have to quit until we have run out of



neighborhoods in Maufrim. We could be as wealthy as we ever dreamed by the time we leave!"

"A splendid thought, Pomill," Sarvel said after a brief silence. "I hope you plan to make the necessary arrangements in the morning."

"I shall do so."

#

"Did you speak with the death show performer, Norgen?" his master, Tilmer, asked mockingly.

"I did not get a chance. He departed before I was able to get through the crowd," Norgen answered, his tone subdued.

"I thought not," Tilmer said in disgust.

"I hope to have another chance, sir."

"And how do you propose you might do so?"

"I could search for their lodgings and find them before they leave Maufrim," Norgen suggested nervously.

"Come now, Norgen, you know you have no time for such an endeavor."

Norgen stood silently for several seconds before speaking again. "Sir, I could have friends watch the city's gates for their exit, and then pursue them."

"You could do that, I admit," responded Tilmer sternly. "You could also use that as an excuse to escape me. Remember, Norgen, that I can sense your every movement. A petty sorcerer such as you cannot hope to escape my wizardly wrath if I choose to exercise it."

"I shall not forget, sir. You should have no fear of that."

Tilmer scowled at his servant. "I have no trust in you, Norgen. You know that. I will always hold you responsible for my wife's death. I hired you because she could perform no magic, and I wanted her protected. Your neglect to shield her from injury was all the proof I needed to see what an irresponsible scoundrel you are."

I repeat my threat to you: if you are unable to bring her back to me from Drimmith, I shall imprison you and subject you to such tortures as you cannot imagine until I am certain that you will hurt no one else through your appalling negligence."

Norgen turned away from Tilmer, shaking with an irrepressible fear.

#

Norgen left his quarters early the next morning, and proceeded through the streets of Maufrim, seeking the friends he trusted to watch for the departure of Sarvel. As he walked, he noticed that the people in the streets seemed unusually excited. He paused at a corner, wondering what the cause might be. He halted a stranger passing by him.

"What is everyone talking about?" he asked.

"The manager of the Show of Death was here early this morning. There are going to be more performances," the stranger replied. "The next will be tomorrow afternoon at Dilser Square!"

Norgen, unable to contain his emotions, let out a scream of happiness, and ran down the street, looking for a place to celebrate. He entered the first tavern he could find, and drank the strongest Maufrim liquor the tavern stocked until he could barely find his way to the door. He slept in an alley for several hours.

He awoke late in the afternoon, and considered his options. He could go back to Tilmer and explain the new developments, but Norgen knew that Tilmer was skeptical about the validity of the Show of

Death. He had little desire to face Tilmer, anyway. His only attractive option was to avoid returning to his master's estate, and he decided to find lodging near Dilser Square. This option gave him the additional advantage that he could be among the first spectators to arrive for the show the next afternoon, and could expect to speak with Sarvel at length. Fully recovered from his drunken slumber, he walked leisurely toward Dilser Square and located an inn nearby with rates he could afford. He rested peacefully, his hopes still alive.

In the morning, after a large breakfast, Norgen walked through Dilser Square. He was among the first to arrive, and chose his place from which to watch. He would be closer than any other spectator to the performance and the first to gain access to Sarvel. He realized this was the most he could ask for in his situation, and he was determined to take full advantage.

#

Sarvel stopped the wagon and began helping Pomill unload the two new money chests, as well as the pedestal upon which he would rest during his period of death. They worked quickly, and within minutes, the objects were arranged as Pomill thought best: the chests closed and placed six feet in front of the pedestal, which raised well above the ground.

Pomill glanced at the vast crowd of spectators. "Are you ready, Sarvel? This will be a big one."

"Let's get started."

Pomill faced the crowd, and when Sarvel had climbed the pedestal and lay resting, the manager yelled, "You are about to witness a most remarkable feat. My colleague, Sarvel, will die, his soul travelling to Drimmith, and then, before the hour is past, will return to our world and describe his Drimmithian experience to you. Sarvel, you may submit to death when you are prepared."

Sarvel drew one deep, relaxing breath, then slipped into intense concentration. He stopped his lungs, stopped his heart, and then stopped his brain. He let his soul float out of his body, and paused above the crowd for a few seconds, awed by its vastness. All had come to see him, and he felt important. Then, he flew across land to the sea. It was a quick journey, since his soul was capable of travelling at great speeds. He plunged into the salt water when he was far from the coast, and drifted into the waiting arms of two mermaids.

The mermaids carried him straight toward the sea bottom, it seemed, but Sarvel knew this was not precisely the case. The sea was still relatively shallow at this point, and they had been diving for far too long not to reach the ocean floor. From experience, he knew that he was in the passageway through which the mermaids ferried the dead to Drimmith.

Soon, he found himself experiencing the familiar but still wondrous sensory stimulation as the mermaids fashioned a new body for his existence in Drimmith. It was a sensation unlike any that could be experienced in life, and it made Sarvel enjoy dying for its own sake. That it was also his profession was just a further reason to be joyful.

His body was complete, and the mermaids broke the water's surface and delivered him to the Drimmithian shore. Sarvel waded through the crashing waves, his new garments miraculously dry, and turned toward the sea. The mermaids waved once, then disappeared into the depths. Sarvel turned from the beach, just beginning to take his first breath of Drimmithian air.

He knew exactly where he wanted to go, a small tavern on the nearby wharf. He climbed the dunes, and walked along a dirt road a few hundred yards until he came to the wharf. He entered the tavern, and found it almost empty. He nodded to the two customers seated at tables as he proceeded to the bar.

"Virthis, how are you?" he greeted the bartender.

"Quite well. Back for another visit, I see," Virthis answered. "What will you have?"

Sarvel thought for a second, then replied, "Why not some Drimmithian ale? Pour yourself a mug, too."

Virthis did so, remarking, "I envy you, Sarvel. You have experienced the joy of death so many times. The rest of us only get one chance."

"So you do, my friend." Sarvel sipped his ale. "I feel very fortunate to have my unique ability."

Virthis and Sarvel conversed until they had drained their mugs.

"I fear I must return," Sarvel said.

Virthis waved as his friend left.

Sarvel knew he had little to tell his audience about this visit. As he returned to the ocean, he resolved to tell them of an earlier, more adventurous visit; no one but he and Pomill would know. He waded into the sea to the awaiting grasp of the mermaids, and as he came into their grasp, consciousness left him.

#

Norgen stood impatiently, barely listening to Sarvel's account of his Drimmithian adventure. "Finish now," he whispered. Sarvel completed his account only seconds later. Norgen tried to determine whether he may have influenced the termination with his sorcerous abilities. He decided that it mattered little. He rushed ahead of everyone after Pomill drew open the chests and invited the spectators to make donations in return for the entertainment they witnessed.

He tried to slip past Pomill, but an arm grabbed him from behind.

"What do you think you are doing?" Pomill's resonant voice demanded.

"I wish to speak with Sarvel."

"I cannot allow that."

"This is an urgent matter," Norgen pleaded.

"Sarvel will not be disturbed by fans," Pomill asserted. "Have you donated some money for this unique entertainment?"

"I have not."

"Do so, then," Pomill commanded. He watched as Norgen dropped several coins into one of the chests.

"Now, get out of the way so the others can make their donations," Pomill ordered as he shoved Norgen aside. The rest of the crowd kept pushing him away until Norgen had no chance to fight his way back to the performer before the crowd dispersed.

He waited, keeping the show's wagon in sight at all times. The crowd finally finished tossing coins into the chests, and the chests were hoisted onto the wagon. The pedestal was then loaded with much less difficulty, and Sarvel took the driver's position. The horses began pulling the wagon slowly out of the square, and Norgen followed, careful not to reveal himself to the rigid manager, Pomill.

The wagon moved slowly enough through the streets of Maufrim that Norgen was able to follow it on foot without sacrificing discretion. Norgen began to weary soon, however, and his frustration was growing, as well. He feared exhaustion and surrender more than anything as he

forced himself to follow, quite conscious that they were his worst enemies. He was thankful when, finally, the wagon pulled up to an inn, and Sarvel and Pomill commenced unloading the wagon, assisted by the inn's employees.

Norgen waited, hidden, until Sarvel and Pomill had finished and gone inside the inn. After a few long minutes, he followed.

"I would like to see two gentlemen named Sarvel and Pomill," he said to the innkeeper calmly. "Could you show me to their room?"

"Certainly," the innkeeper replied.

He led Norgen upstairs to one of a large number of chambers. Norgen knocked on the door.

"Come in." It was Sarvel's voice.

Norgen entered.

"Not you again!" Pomill immediately recognized Norgen. "I told you that you could not speak with Sarvel. Get out!"

"It's all right, Pomill," Sarvel calmly told his manager. "What can I do for you, and what is your name?"

"Norgen. I need to ask you for a great favor. Would you teach me how to die and resurrect myself?"

"The last thing we need is a competitor, Sarvel," Pomill said gruffly.

"That's not why I need the ability," Norgen protested.

"And suppose you tell us the reason?" Sarvel said.

"I am a servant of the wizard, Tilmer," Norgen explained. "I am a sorcerer of fairly low rank and little potential. Tilmer hired me to guard his wife, who had no powers at all. He loved her very much, and distrusted chance happenings. Through my neglect to protect her properly, she was killed in an accident. Tilmer blames me for negligence, and threatens to torture me if I can't bring her back. I think he may be looking forward to it."

"That's very touching," Sarvel commented, "but I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Please sir, I must bring her back to Tilmer."

"Even if I wanted to teach you, which I don't, I couldn't teach you. It's an ability unique to me. I tried to teach Pomill once, and he couldn't learn."

"I must know!"

Pomill intervened. "Learn on your own, if you can. But leave us now, or I will throw you out with my own hands."

Sarvel let out a cry of pain. Pomill turned to his friend to see him clutching his back. Then, he noticed Norgen with a slight, malicious smile.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, uneasily.

"I will force it from him, if I must," Norgen replied. "I told you I am a sorcerer, and I will gladly use the limited power I possess to get what I need."

Pomill tried to charge Norgen, but couldn't reach him. Norgen had protected himself at the same time he attacked Sarvel.

"Tell me your secret!" he commanded Sarvel.

"I can't!" Sarvel screamed back.

He cringed in increased agony inflicted by the desperate Norgen.

"You can't do this!" Pomill's protest was empty.

Suddenly, Sarvel's body went limp, and he crumpled to the ground. Pomill rushed to his friend.

"He died," Pomill said, after a brief examination.

"Well, I didn't kill him," Norgen protested, his sorcery halted.

"I think he died on his own," the mahager replied. "He can

probably return when he wishes."

"Then, I shall wait until he does. He won't escape me."

#

Sarvel hovered above the room until he was certain Pomill would be safe. For all of Pomill's hostility, Norgen mostly ignored the manager. Sarvel was grateful that Norgen understood Pomill's ignorance.

Satisfied that Norgen would not attack Pomill, Sarvel flew across the land to the sea, into the waiting arms of his familiar mermaids.

"We didn't expect you again so soon," one said to him.

"An emergency," Sarvel explained. "A sorcerer named Norgen was attacking me for the secret of resurrection. This was my only escape."

"This is a grave matter, indeed," the mermaids agreed. "A sorcerer learning the secret of resurrection could be a serious threat."

"I couldn't tell him anything if I wanted to," Sarvel said.

"Nevertheless, we would like to see him neutralized."

His new body was almost finished and the mermaids prepared to set him on the Drimmithian shore.

"I'm afraid you may have to remain in Drimmith until we decide what we can do," a mermaid told him, as he stood on the beach.

"That's no problem. I'm not ready to meet Norgen in Bandallo again very soon."

The mermaids plunged into the depths. Sarvel had a strange feeling he might need help very soon. He went straight to his closest Drimmithian friend, Virthis.

"Back so soon?" the bartender greeted.

"Virthis, I need your help. Come down to the beach with me."

Virthis closed his tavern and followed Sarvel to the beach, bewildered by his friend's strange behavior.

#

"I don't understand," Pomill said to Norgen. "It's been over two hours. Sarvel has never stayed in Drimmith longer than one."

"I'm not sure he's coming back," Norgen replied, scowling at the manager.

"He'll come back, if only to experience death again," Pomill assured the sorcerer.

Norgen paced the floor again. "Then, there is just one possibility. He's waiting until he thinks I'll be gone. Well, if that's what he wants to do, I'll go to him."

Pomill stood, paralyzed, as Norgen's body crumpled to the floor. Norgen's soul instinctively set a swift course for the sea.

#

Sarvel and Virthis waited on the beach, watching for some sign of the mermaids. Sarvel began to worry whether they would return, whether they could find a way to neutralize Norgen's threat. Sarvel was no threat, himself, to return to Bandallo, since he had no capabilities for magic. But the laws governing life and death decreed that an adept, though unable to use his magic in Drimmith, would find his previous powers amplified if he ever returned to Bandallo. One such as Norgen, who had no outstanding virtues, even if he also had no malicious intentions, should not be allowed to return.

Suddenly, they saw two mermaids surface, and Sarvel was shocked to see Norgen with them. The sorcerer stormed from the ocean toward Sarvel, his fury clearly displayed in his gait.

"I want your secret!" he shouted.

Abruptly, he stopped, apparently stunned. Sarvel deduced that Norgen had just learned of the loss of his powers. He walked slowly toward the sorcerer, intent on confronting his aggressor.

"Your advantage is gone, Norgen," he said calmly. "I'm afraid you are in Drimmith for eternity."

Norgen drove his fist into Sarvel's jaw. Sarvel drew the back of his hand across his lip, discovering that in Drimmith, the dead bleed. Norgen struck him again, and then forced him to the ground. Sarvel struggled to throw him off, and freed his arm long enough to throw a harmless punch to Norgen's side. He felt Norgen suddenly pull off. Virthis threw the sorcerer to the sand. The bartender, an accomplished wrestler, pinned Norgen before Sarvel could get to his feet.

"Go back, friend," Virthis yelled to Sarvel.

Sarvel ran for the sea. The mermaids awaited him.

Behind him, he heard Virthis say to Norgen, "I'm afraid you have lost. But Drimmith is really a fine place to exist in death. I'll take you back to my tavern and give you a drink."

Sarvel crashed through the shallow waves before he could hear Norgen's response. He leapt into the waiting arms of the mermaids.

Immediately, one said to Sarvel, "We will take you back. But your next death will be permanent. We cannot allow this to happen again. I hope you understand."

"I do," Sarvel replied. "I'll miss you very much."

The mermaids touched his forehead, and he lost consciousness.

#

Tilmer knocked on the door to which he had been led. Pomill opened it, permitting the wizard to enter. He saw Sarvel sitting in a chair. It was only then that he noticed Norgen's body lying on the floor.

"What happened?" he requested softly, but demandingly.

"Who are you?" Pomill demanded before Sarvel could speak.

"My name is Tilmer. I am Norgen's employer."

"He followed me to Drimmith," Sarvel explained. "He was desperate to bring your wife back. I'm afraid his death is permanent."

Tilmer stared at the dead body for a moment. "He tried harder than I expected of him. At least he died in desperation. I hope his Drimmithian days are filled with guilt."

"I'm afraid that won't be the case, sir" Sarvel said.

"His only regret will be that he won't be able to experience death again. That will be his sole sadness. Even I am depressed by knowing that my next death will be my last, since I have tasted the experience."

Tilmer frowned at Sarvel. "When I die, I shall seek him and deliver his just punishment."

Sarvel quietly remarked, "I should think that a reunion with your deceased wife would negate the need of that."

Tilmer stared at the floor briefly, then gathered Norgen's body, and left the room without another word.

Mine Is Forever

BY

KEITH HUDSON

The chained and naked titan awoke with a groan and quickly surveyed the scattered scene that surrounded him. His eyes were still bright and shining gold, undiminished by the centuries of captivity upon this pinnacle of rather dubious existence and questionable realistic quality, and they still seemed to understand everything they came into contact with. The titan's body was spread-eagled upon a slab of broken rock, facing upward into the lights of distant Olympus. Below him was a soft bed of clouds, lavender and blue in the eternal twilight. This sheer and thin crag which is said to never have existed has been the titan's prison for a very long time. He has been bound and chained to this place for one million years and a day...

...bound and chained for one million years and a day...

The titan struggled with the chains that pinioned him to this miserable rock and found that they were secure. Of course they were secure. The silver chains which held him had been fashioned by Hephaestus to hold one of The Gods. What else could they be but secure? Had the chains not been driven into the very roots of the mountain? Of course they had. He shook some of the long sleep from his head and wondered why he was here and how he had arrived. Perhaps if he could remember his name the rest would come to him.

One million years and a day seemed like such an awfully long time.

A distant speck of darkness above the titan detached itself from the shadows of Olympus and began to descend upon him in ever-widening circles. The thing seemed to be in no hurry. It spent most of its time circling lazily above on invisible currents. The titan lay back upon his bed of broken rocks and watched the approaching creature with a distinctly distant manner. There were so many memories that the years had drained away. Here was something that he remembered. And as soon as he recognized the carrion bird, which was quickly approaching, and saw the scar which was just beginning to heal upon his side, he knew that life would be miserable. The titan decided that he would lure the beast into a friendly conversation. Perhaps a deal could be arranged...

The vulture alighted upon an outcropping of rock near his side. For a moment they simply stared at one another. The wise and wondering golden eyes of the titan stared into the fiery red eyes of a demon of Hades. They locked, strove for supremacy, then fell away from each other. The golden eyes of the titan fell upon the newly healed scar on his side and the fiery gaze of the vulture wandered off the precipice and into the thunderous clouds below.

"It is a long drop," announced the titan in a weary voice. "Pity that I am chained and cannot show you just how long a fall it may, or may not, be."

The vulture cocked its head and stared at the titan for a moment as



if wondering; then surmising that the quarry was still properly bound and chained, it leapt forward with a flutter of wings and examined the newly healed scar on the titan's side. The scene was frozen into a painting. Neither of the creatures even so much as blinked an eye.

"Well?" asked the titan, after a few moments of unbearable silence.

The vulture gazed at him and bounded back onto the outcropping of rock in a rather frightened and clumsy fashion. It stood there, bouncing from foot to foot, then glared at the imprisoned giant.

"Well, what?" it returned, in a voice which was not unlike that of a well-trained myna bird.

"Well," roared the titan, "are you going to help yourself to my liver once again, or shall you finally heed my advice and extend your knowledge of culinary delights to an arm, or a leg? I might well suggest the thigh; it is said to be a very tender portion..."

The vulture answered rapidly, as though it were accustomed to such conversations. "Ah, I thank you, but your liver shall be most enjoyable and should prove a more than adequate meal."

"Very well, then, shall we proceed...?"

The vulture had been staring off into the clouds below. It now returned its attention to the chained titan and glanced at him as if he might know something. The voice was uncertain, not as sure as it had been. "Do you remember?" asked the vulture, "Do you remember anything at all?"

"I recall a few bawdy songs... a certain taste which I think to be that of a very fine wine...and I remember a place called Olympus... very little else, actually. I am afraid that the years have taken their toll. Was there any specific memory that you had in mind?"

"I was thinking of any memories that you may have retained concerning the fate of Man. Do you remember Man?"

The titan thought for a moment, then thought for a moment longer. Yes: there had been something...

"I remember furry little creatures that I used to speak to. I thought them very funny, for some strange reason I do not recall. There is something. Perhaps this is the 'Man' of which you speak...I am not certain.

"That is the one I speak of," replied the vulture.

"I know nothing of his fate; it does not concern me."

The bird fluttered to the titan's side, always seeming awkward as it moved. The titan stiffened, but realized that any resistance would prove futile, and end in a vain waste of strength and a prolonged agony. This was something that he remembered.

"I would rather that you didn't do this thing, bird," announced the giant.

The vulture pecked playfully at the scar on the titan's side, drawing a small stream of blood.

"And, I would rather that you would remember. Do you remember your name?"

"I remember that there was a name."

The titan screamed in agony as the vulture pecked a bit more playfully at the newly healed flesh.

"All that I recall is that I was called by a name," cried the titan, as the hungry vulture tore into his side again. "That is all that I wish to remember. Ask no more of me."

Again, the vulture raised his bloody beak, lowered it, then came up with a chunk of raw flesh to swallow, slowly, as the titan watched and screamed. After a while, the screams subsided into groans of dismay.

"That won't do at all. I think that you should remember more," suggested the vulture casually. "What is your name?" it finished

demandingly.

"My name is Prometheus!" cried the titan to the lights of Olympus. The crag began to sway and crack. The outcropping of rock fell into the cloudy abyss that waited below; a long drop to nowhere. The vulture flapped its wings frantically to stay upright.

"I am Prometheus."

"That is very good. I am glad to see that you are finally remembering just who and what you are. Yes, that pleases me very much." The vulture cocked its head at the titan. "Tell me, do you know why you are here?"

The titan was stunned. There were so many things that he had forgotten in the long sleep, so many questions which were being answered in so little time.

"I am Prometheus," muttered the giant. "I am the giver of light into the world. I am one of the many sons of Zeus and demand access to my father's kingdom."

The vulture tore into Prometheus' side repeatedly, tearing open the entire area and exposing the inner organs of the demi-god. His wails of agony shook the mountain and threatened to shatter the lights of Olympus.

"That is wonderful. You are beginning to remember," stated the vulture gleefully. "We can finish up here soon and be on our way."

Prometheus gasped for air. His entire body felt as if it had been impaled upon the mountain of non-existence. The vulture toyed with him and allowed a small amount of the pain to subside.

"Now," said the vulture, as though it were speaking to a child, "do you remember the fate of Man?"

"I gave that stupid magician fire," confessed Prometheus with a sigh. "I didn't think that he'd do that with it..."

"And now, Man has destroyed himself. That is why you are here, bound and chained for one million years and a day," finished the vulture.

The titan began to weep. He was the one who had allowed them to create weapons which would destroy them or carry them to the lights of Olympus. It had been his hope that Man would, some day, arrive at the Gates of Olympus and be welcomed there. But that was not to be. Man decided that he needed weapons. Man had long ago destroyed himself. This was the thing that Prometheus had seen from his lofty pinnacle.

"Now do you remember?" asked the vulture, as it detected the look of sadness in the golden eyes of the demi-god. "Now do you remember?"

The titan nodded. Yes, he recalled everything now.

"Have the Gods forgiven me my ignorance? Will you come to me yet again?"

The vulture drove its beak into the titan's side. He squirmed, raking his back upon the broken rocks on which he lay, and screamed so loudly that the chains were loosened from the roots of the mountain. The vulture ignored Prometheus' pleas and tore the titan's liver from its resting place with practiced ease. As the golden eyes of the giant watched, the vulture devoured the helpless victim's organ in a gulp.

"It is good that you finally remember, Prometheus, for Man was a fool and not worthy of your attention. Now, you have destroyed the Children of the Gods."

Prometheus wept and the vulture continued its monologue.

"You gave Man a secret that he was not ready to have. The Gods foresaw this thing. Yet, you disobeyed their counsel. There will be other children, we can only hope, and you shall not be so rash and hurried to give the Children of the Gods what you feel to be adequate

protection against the elements..."

Prometheus wept and groaned. The mountain of non-existence had been nearly shattered by his cries of pain. The vulture's eternally blood-stained beak seemed to smile down at the chained figure.

"You have now spent one million years upon this place of punishment. Your sentence is nearly complete." The vulture hesitated a moment and then appeared to grin. "I shall see you tomorrow..."

Prometheus sighed.

Bound and chained for one million years and a day...

— — — **DR** — — —

(THE GARDENER continued from pg. 9)

anemone at that.

Naturally, Critch could not take full credit for the miraculous rebirth of the plum tree. As they had before, in all of the phases of his life, the gods had helped him here as well, having provided the necessary elements needed for the tree to blossom and grow as it stood a watchful guard over Critch. The sun had provided the light and warmth, Critch doing his part with water and careful pruning.

And yes, the gods had done their best at providing fertilizer...

— — — **DR** — — —

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The Best There Is

BY

MICHAEL C. MCPHERSON

"Come on in," said the spider to the fly. Anyway, that's the way Freddie read the individual that led him into the sleazy little room for the job interview. The man was dressed in a dark suit, walked around like he was the President of Wall Street and sort of looked at you as if you were a specimen for the historical society.

It was one of those fly-by-night outfits. Freddie knew that, right off. The room was small and came equipped with only a couple of rickety, straight-backed chairs and an old office desk for company. But Freddie didn't care. He had long gotten over the taste for luxuries. All he knew was that there was a story flooding the neighborhood that this company paid out four dollars cash to every applicant, whether they got hired or not. Man, that was two crisp, brand new Jeffersons! More than enough for a good bottle of hootch.

The one thing Freddie wasn't interested in, besides the interview, was a permanent job. He liked odd jobs. The ones nobody else cared about doing. The kind that didn't last long, paid in cash as soon as you were finished and afforded you enough to buy a good bowl of soup down at the mission house, as well as a little left over to throw in with the boys down around the railroad tracks for another gallon of wine.

"How old are you?" the man asked, pulling up a chair and drawing a soiled notebook from out of the desk drawer.

"Sixty-one come June," replied Freddie, rolling a thick tongue over his parched lips. He clutched the sides of his chair as he sat down. Somehow, this do-gooder made him feel nervous. Not that he was afraid of him, either. It was just an inner feeling lurking around inside of him that warned him to stay on his guard. Like when one of those door-to-door salesmen call on you and give you the once over with their eyes. They always seem to know exactly what the best pitch is to use to win you over with a sale. And before you know what's happening, they've conned you into buying dozens of magazines with a whopping sixty-months subscription trailing behind.

"Ever shovel coal before?"

"Wha-at? Well sure!" He scratched feverishly at his gray-matted beard. "But I thought they stopped mining that stuff years ago -- didn't they?" Freddie couldn't remember the last time he had buried his head in a newspaper. Usually, the only reading material he and the boys ever got their hands on, were tattered copies of PLAYBOY and STAG they dug out of garbage cans. Ordinary news items didn't interest any of them anymore. And besides, their wine-soaked craniums couldn't handle those big words, nor understand advancing technology or cope with the social events on the high society register.

The interviewer sniffed the air. "You have the smell of the railroad on you," he said, grinning. "You might be just the man I'm

looking for."

"What kind of smell is that?" Freddie asked suspiciously.

The man leaned forward on the desk and coupled his hands together.

"Why, the smell of grease and coal oil, of course."

Freddie's mind drifted to the storage house down by the tracks, and sniffing his worn-out old overcoat, he had to admit that the shack did have a way of rubbing its fifty-year-old fragrance off on a man.

"Weren't those the days?" mused the man. "Steam locomotives puffing their way across town to destinations unknown. You could almost feel the strain of the engine as it wheezed by you in a cloud of steam."

"Yeah I remember," Freddie reminisced sadly. "I used to work them old babies back in the fifties. Best stoker this side of Battle Mountain, I was. There wasn't too many railroad men back then who could keep up with me," he chuckled with a shake of his head.

"Yes, I know," the man added with a wry grin.

"How would you know that? You don't know me. I've never met you before, have I?"

Never losing his 'cool hand Luke' smile, the interviewer flipped open his notebook and ran his finger down a long list of names until he found what he was looking for. "Do you remember a guy by the name of Arthur Fieldhouse?"

"Yeah sure," said Freddie, suddenly sitting up and making a loud noise as he cleared his throat. "We used to work together back in the old days..."

"Was he a good stoker - good at shovelling coal?"

Freddie's faced turned beet-red. "That nincompoop couldn't keep up with a baby shovelling sand down at the beach," he hollered. "And besides, he wasn't nothin' but a squealer to those boys up in head office. If it wasn't for him, I would've still had a job, been pensioned off right now in some cozy little rest home, instead of living it out in a rundown shack."

"Is that why you killed him?"

"Mister," rasped Freddie, getting out of his chair, "I don't know where you got your information, and I don't care, but I'm not going to answer anymore of your damned questions."

"I only know that Art went and told the higher-ups that I was liftin' coal out of the bins and takin' it home at night to help feed my woodstove. Sure, I hated him for the longest time. But that's over and done with now. All in the past. Even I can forgive and forget." He headed for the door. "Forget about the four bucks," he added with a nervous smile, "I won't be needing it."

"Forgiveness is something I'll never understand," the man said icily. Freddie fumbled with the doorknob and was suprised to see it break off at the handle and drop into his hands. "But your friend seems to share your feelings."

"What do you mean?" asked Freddie, losing control of his voice.

"He talks about you all the time. And yes, he too is convinced now that you are probably the best stoker of all time. The best there ever was."

I guess that's why I took such an interest in you. But the best part, really, was when he told me how you beat him to death with your shovel down there in the coal bins."

"How could you know that? And for that matter, who the hell are you anyway?"

Freddie screamed as he watched the man suddenly begin to change shape. Turning back towards the door, he clawed at the frame until his fingers bled. Uttering a loud gasp, he backed away as it burst

"DOUBLE DARE YA"

BY

A.R. MORLAN

The lengthening afternoon shadows turned the cobbled streets into a sea of sharp knives, pointed tips reaching for the baseball shoes of the five children standing in the middle of the quiet residential street. The thinnest of the three boys present stepped backwards from his companions, and as he tilted his Little League cap at a defiant angle, said, "Wouldn't you be happy if I bought cha a new ball?"

"Nuthin' wrong with the old one... cept that it's in there," replied the oldest (and dumbest, or so thought many of his team-mates) of the five children, hitching his BANNERTON BRAVES insignia-covered shoulders towards the "there" in question -- the brick frame house, graced with a rust mottled FOR SALE sign... the old abandoned house with the recently broken front window.

"Aw, Johnny, why don't cha let Derrick just buy you a new one," the third boy, the one with the wooden bat clutched in a grimy left hand taunted, "He can't help it if he's too chicken-poop to go into that old haunted house --"

"Am not chicken-poop, Aaron," Derrick shot back. Johnny -- son of "Crome-Dome" Riley, the coach of the Bannerton Braves Little League team, undisputably the worst player in the League, yet the player always dubbed "Most Valuable Player" come the end of each season by unanimous vote of the League coaches -- quit jerking his shoulders long enough to ask, "if you ain't, how come you don't go in there and get it? You afraid of a big empty house? Huh? Think old man Dooley is gonna jump out and bite you on the --"

"For cryin' out loud, he's dead," Derrick said in a how-can-you-be-sc-dumb tone of voice. He flexed his hand inside his mitt, testing its strength.

"That's what they say, but 'who knows what evil lurks' --"

"Aw Heather, cut that out," Johnny snapped. Scraping a bit of grass clinging to his baseball shoes onto the cobbled streets below -- Bannerton was one of the few towns on the east coast to keep all of its streets cobbled -- Johnny stared past Derrick, towards the Dooley house across the street. As far as haunted houses went, the Dooley house didn't have much of a reputation yet; no headless ghosts banging the shutters, no headless hounds from Hell chasing after the mailman, but considering that old man Dooley had only been dead for a couple of years -- two empty years for the house -- it was haunted enough for the four ten year olds and twelve year old who were approaching it on a listless August afternoon. Didn't this house pass -- unsold and unrented -- through the hands of four different realtors, including Stewart "This Property is Condemned" Realty? And didn't Amanda hear something strange near the house while selling Girl Scout Cookies in this neighborhood this spring? After a while she calmed down and said it was only a dog yapping, but her friends remembered her white,

blubbling lips, and her whispered, "It sounded like screams."

Across the street, the painted metal sign which hung on the big maple on Dooley's lawn thunked against the trunk. "Clarke Realtors -- FOR SALE --- 555-7217" it said in rusty letters against a cream-colored background, but the sign hung by only two of three chains, the left one having rusted through last fall.

That fact explained why the sign hung slightly crooked now... and the fact that it was hanging slightly off kilter lent credence to the children's notion that the old house was, indeed, haunted.

Pulling his cap over one faded blue eye, Johnny "Son of Coach Chrome-Dome" Riley handed down the ultimatum, "Double-Dare ya, Derrick. Go in and get my ball or I'll tell Da-Coach Riley that you can't hit a ball worth diddly."

"Maybe he doesn't take Double-Dares, maybe he doesn't think that he has to," said Amanda -- mindful of 'Who Was Boss,' bouncing the thick end of her aluminum bat on the cobbles, making a ringing PONG-PONG-PONG sound that reverberated up and down the street.

"You know that I take Double-Dares, remember Halloween?" Derrick cut in anxiously. Suddenly, it was like it happened yesterday, that last Halloween that the five of them had seen old man Dooley alive. The light behind the pulled-down shades looked almost greenish, sickly, but the old geezer's collection of house plants probably accounted for that... or so Derrick told himself as he crept toward the house that night, his mist-soaked Darth Vader costume flapping wetly around his ankles, his half-full treats bag clutched in his shaking fingers. Plants inside the house or not, the greenish light made the pumpkins on the porch look... weird. It seemed like he had knocked forever, hoping that the old man wouldn't answer, hoping that he could fulfill Johnny's dread Double-Dare just by touching the peeling house, by reaching up for the brass knocker next door.

Behind him, the others had waited, trying not to giggle, watching him intently. He spun around for a half second, just to make sure they weren't trying to sneak off, and when he did so, the inner door opened, and he saw Heather's mouth fall open under her half-mask, and he turned around... and saw --

The Plant Monster. All deep green and slimy and trailing leafy tentacles, and smelling so bad, like the gooshy gloop left in the sink drain after Mom let the dish water out once she was done washing up the pots and pans. It had hovered, tall and glistening in the greenish light, over Derrick for what seemed like one and a half forever, then -- it laughed, and threw off the coating of leaves, and it was only old man Dooley, with his pink liver-spotted bald spot and store-bought choppers, and he handed out five little boxes of Sun Maid raisins before Derrick and the others ran off. Derrick was glad that his Darth Vader get-up had a long tunic...otherwise, the rest of the kids would have seen how he wet himself. As it was, Johnny kept reminding him how he screamed, "just like a girl." Even Amanda and Heather didn't do that.

"That was a long time ago... I just Double-Dared you today." Johnny crossed his puffy freckled arms, a sick smile on his peeling round face. Heather seconded the arms crossed gesture, seeking approval, while Aaron and Amanda bounced their bats on the cobbles, PONG-PONG, THUNK, THUNK...

Swallowing hard with a dry mouth and throat, Derrick countered, "If you guys are so brave, why don't we all go in there?"

"But you're the dork who batted my ball in there, and Da-Coach Riley won't like it when he hears what a bad hitter you are... 'sides, I Double Dared you, so you gotta go in," Johnny explained.

"Yeah, you're the one who's always bragging how you can catch and hit," Aaron added, with a quick glance at Johnny to see if he said the right thing.

Derrick took another look over at the house, at the boards flaked grey-bare in spots, the dull brick chipped, the broken window glinting sharp-sharded in the waning light. No matter how hard he tried to shake the image from his mind, he couldn't forget that Plant Monster, and the way the place seemed so green behind it... but then he remembered the Double-Dare, and the way ol' Chrome-Dome Riley (aka Skin-skull) would glare at him come practice tomorrow, and Johnny's dad might ask Derrick to return his uniform, informing him that he was off the team...

Handing his mitt to Heather, Derrick stalked off without a word, across the cobbled street. The house seemed to grow bigger as he approached, looming like old man Dooley had on that long-ago night... silly, he told himself, swinging his arms, it's not a haunted house at all...but in the fading gold light, it sure did look haunted.

The unkempt lawn was littered with candy wrappers, old leaves and fragments of yellowing newspaper. Purposefully, Derrick marched onto the porch, across the warped boards that sang underfoot, and up to the rusted screen door which hung in front of the deeply carved inner wood door. The screen was snagged out, as if a cat got her claws stuck in places and tried to pull herself free. The knob felt cool and greasy under his fingers, like when Mom and Dad took him to Philadelphia and Derrick had roached over the rope barrier and touched the Liberty Bell. Historical or not, it had felt kind of slimy, even if Dad yelled at him for saying so at the time.

"Double-Dare ya to actually get in there," came the taunt from across the street.

Angry that Johnny would add another Double-Dare to the one previously given ('does that make it a Quadruple-Dare'? he asked himself), Derrick turned the slippery knob, opened the protesting screen door, then tried the inner, more elaborately molded knob and -- finding to his unease that it was unlocked -- went in without a backward glance. He'd teach Johnny to give double Double-Dares!

Inside, it was warm, dry and sharp-smelling, like tomcat tinkle, only more intense, wilder, like maybe a lot of little animals took a leak in the house, a scent underscored by a sweetish, fulsome odor Derrick didn't quite recognize. Thick dust kitties clung to his shoes, and he felt a little sick when he bent down to pull them off. They were squishy-soft, and gave under his tanned fingers. The green papered walls (a riot of loopy vines, blasted cabbage roses and underlying lattice-work) looked like they'd been crying brown tears; irregular dark stains covered the upper, peeling, sections of the wall, revealing an older, redder design underneath. The old man must have slapped up the new stuff over the old, just adding layers to the walls. Near the bottom of each wall, Derrick could see yet a third pattern covering the green paper, just a few shreds in place, but enough to tell that the last paper old man Dooley applied to his walls was tan, like sunburned skin. Most of this paper lay in fat curls along the baseboards (for a second, Derrick thought of the pie-dough stickies his mother would bake along with the pie; swirls of butter and sugar filled tan pastry) with some of the curls looking oddly... full, like the paper was curled around something besides itself. Looking at those loose rolls of fallen paper made Derrick feel all funny inside, and he looked around frantically for the ball which he had hit into the house only minutes before. The floor under the dust was maple-colored, and the dust turned it grey in places, just a

perfect hiding place for a lost ball. Not wanting to feel for the ball with his bare hands, Derrick poked into the larger piles of dust with his feet, while through the broken window he could hear the insistent tattoo of bats being pounded on the cobbles -- PONG, THUNK, PONG-PONG, THUNK, PONGPONGPONG -- a Morse Code tapped in aluminum and wood on rock, a primitive-sounding beat, not unlike an arhythmic heartbeat. Sweating, Derrick told himself that the ball had to be in the living room; he wasn't going to go into the other dark rooms which branched off from the short hallway... Double-Dare or Quadruple-Dare, the rooms were a no go. Looking down at his hands, seeing how greenish they were in the reflection from the vines-and-roses wallpaper Derrick remembered the green-tinged light coming from behind Dooley's shades that Halloween night, and decided that the old man's plants must not have changed the color of the light after all. Besides, all the plants (as well as the furniture) were gone now; Derrick was quite alone in the house, except for the dust kitties, and the animal-mildew-sickly smells... and Johnny's damned ball, wherever it rolled to. Reluctantly, having stomped down all the dust kitties, Derrick had to poke the curls of fallen wallpaper with his toe, and recoiled in disgust when a squirrel's tail fell out of one of the loose rolls... just a tail, along with a few whitish bones, disconnected and smoothly clean of flesh (it's just old wallpaper, Derrick kept reminding himself), bones that rolled when freed from their paper shroud.

A dry snicking sound startled Derrick -- above him, a larger corner of the green wall covering flopped down, revealing a wide triangle of the reddish wallpaper below. Trying to ignore the pounding in his chest, Derrick poked the rest of the paper curls... telling himself that the bones he felt with his foot inside the rolls were put there by a cat, or maybe the animals crawled inside the paper to die. The metallic PONG-PONG-PONG and more resonant THUNK-THUNK of the bats outside was soon underscored by the whispery snick and rasp of paste-backed paper falling off the four walls around Derrick, yellowy-backed rolls of vibrant green... which landed in fat curls (a bit like dead moths on a sidewalk, layer of papery-thinness and color) against the floorboards. Waiting.

Feeling a large spherical roundness under one of the brittle curls of paper, Derrick thought, (when I come out, Johnny, you are gonna hear some wild Double-Dares yourself -- if you can do that to yourself) as he reached down to grab the ball... then, with a quick parting rasp, a vine-covered sheet rolled off the wall. Onto Derrick. Where it continued to roll around him, curling. Curling tighter.

The dust near the big curl turned maroon, then spread out, pinkly.

The old-fashioned street lamps -- the better to go with the cobbled streets, my dears -- flickered on, casting golden light on the heads of the four children seated on the curb across from the old Dooley house. Amanda continued to bounce her bat up and down on the cobbles, until Heather reached out with her foot and kicked the bat out of her friend's hand.

Soon the shiny bat was in Heather's lap, covered by Derrick's mitt. Nobody wanted to put that mitt on their hand, not after they heard that fine, shrill, yet curiously muffled sound that must have been a cat, but didn't quite sound like one, something like Amanda's yapping dog that didn't really sound canine... the sound had come about a quarter of an hour after Derrick entered the empty Dooley house.



rodger gerberding © 1987

The swinging sign thunked against the thick gnarled trunk of the maple, a dull hollow sound. Aaron read the sign, the rusted words, for the hundredth time, only silently. When he had read them aloud, the others told him to shut up.

"Johnny, what did old man Dooley die of?"

"You know." Those were the first sounds Johnny had uttered in nearly two hours. More silence, broken only by the thump of metal against wood, then, reluctantly, Johnny squeaked, "He was real old... died of something old folks get..."

"Like what? Like what did he die of?" Amanda persisted, not worried about staying in Coach Riley's son's favor. All eyes were on Johnny.

"Uhm...ticker went out...he was real old...you know how old peeps get when..."

"When what?" sharply, from Aaron.

Johnny was hugging his knees, chin balanced on his kneecaps. He whispered something, which prompted Heather to do something no one else had ever...dared to do to Coach Chrome-Dome's sonny-boy.

"I Double-Dare you to tell me what old man Dooley died of." The words hung in the night air, shaking with uneasy authority.

There was no balding, glaring, yelling coach to protect Johnny. Gulping he said, "Dad...said it was because his ticker gave out 'cause he was scared...scared real bad when something happened to him...something he wasn't expecting."

"Real...bad?" Heather's lips shook under the golden light.

"It wasn't nothing, though," Johnny shot back, glad that he had scared the girls, "His son was visiting him, and a piece of loose wallpaper came down and brushed him on his bald spot...that's when he...anyway, Dad knows Pete Dooley, and Dad said it was nothing to get scared of, so the old goat's heart must've been no good to start with..."

Aaron, Heather and Amanda mulled over this bit of information...since the Coach had said there was nothing to be afraid of in there, each came to the same thought...Derrick probably couldn't find Johnny's ball, so he sneaked out the back, and went home. He probably was there right now, laughing his guts out over them, sitting on the curb for hours, like jerks...all because of Johnny, and his dumb rule about obeying his Double-Dare --

Aaron suddenly looked at each of the girls for approval, got it, and took the lead. "Johnny...maybe you better go see where Derrick is. Maybe he couldn't find your ball, so he ran home and hid."

"Uh-uh."

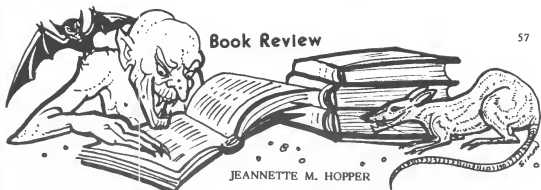
"But you're team captain, and he's part of your team," Heather added.

"Uh-uh."

"Johnny...we Double-Dare you to go in there and find Derrick, or your ball."

Johnny looked at Amanda like she had struck him. His fleshy pink lips worked like a fish mouth, silently. Three level, angry pairs of eyes met his pale blue ones. Moving stiffly on his cramped legs, Johnny stood up, saying, "I'll only be a minute," then walked to the house, where the street lamp illuminated the red wallpaper on the living room walls, broken here and there by a descending curl of brittle green paper.

Less than a minute later, Johnny found something almost round and fairly whitish on the floor, but it was too big to be his baseball.



Messages From Michael, by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, copyright 1979, Berkley Books.

In October, 1970 an entity calling itself "Michael" suprised the hosts and guests at a dinner party by announcing, "We are here with you tonight."

The method of communication was a Ouija board, and the transcripts of the following eleven years' conversations have been compiled and given life by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. In this facinating and engrossing book, Yarbro gives us the complete human characters (who, by the way are real people), and Michael gives us his knowledge.

Here are two of Michael's messages, typed in all capitals as they are in the text:

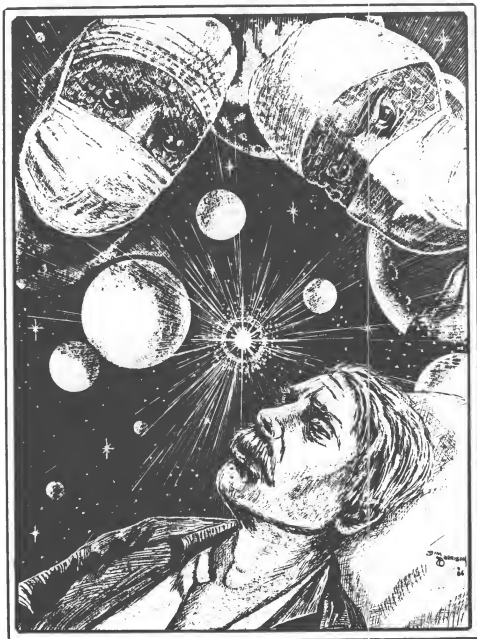
"EACH SOUL IS PART OF A LARGER BODY, AN ENTITY. EACH ENTITY IS MADE UP OF ABOUT A THOUSAND SOULS, EACH OF WHICH ENTERS THE PHYSICAL PLANE AS MANY TIMES AS IS NECESSARY TO EXPERIENCE ALL ASPECTS OF LIFE AND ACHIEVE HUMAN UNDERSTANDING. AT THE END OF THE CYCLES ON THE PHYSICAL PLANE, THE FRAGMENTS ONCE AGAIN REUNITE AS WE HAVE REUNITED..."

"WE ARE NOT THE PATH (to spiritual enlightenment). WE ARE AN ANCIENT ENTITY THAT COMES TO ALL WHO ASK. OUR PURPOSE IS TO TEACH SOME UNDERSTANDING OF THE EVOLUTION ON THE PHYSICAL PLANE SO THAT THE STUDENT CAN REACH SOME INSIGHT INTO HUMAN BEHAVIOR WHICH WILL ENABLE HIM THEN TO STOP BROODING OVER INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS OR THE LACK THEREOF AND CONCENTRATE ON PERSONAL LIFE PLANS."

Regardless of your beliefs, you can't help but come away from this book feeling as if you've learned something. What Michael teaches his students is that we've all led other lives, and, as the planchette whizzes over the board night after night, we come to realize that all our lives, past and present, are intertwined. He reveals the many stages our souls must go through, learning from every level, before we, too, can be reunited with fellow souls as Michael has been. (The entity Michael is the entire group; the name was used by one fragment in its last incarnation, and chosen solely as a means of address. The pronoun "he" might be interchangeable with "they" or "it.")

The chaos of the world is explained through soul-ages of leaders, of nations, and of the planet itself. As his students learn, so do we, that everyone of us falls into particular categories that determine who we are and what we will do with our lives. The people receiving the messages ask questions, which, like the messages themselves, were carefully recorded by the students, and answers are given in clear, easily understandable language. Nothing is to be taken on plain "faith," and there is no hedging of issues, no preaching -- in fact, Michael states several times that there is to be no religion built around his teachings.

I'm inclined to beleive this book, even though I'm a natural skeptic. If Chelsea Quinn Yarbro or the people with the Ouija board invented all this, they're either geniuses who deserve a Nobel Peace Prize, or brilliant lunatics. Read it and decide for yourself.



On a Far and Distant Planet

BY

KATHLEEN JURGENS

That damn fool thing was in here again this morning. Anyway, I guess it was morning. It fiddled with the hangings on the wall 'til a shot of warm, white light striped the bed. I used to think "it" was a woman; now, I'm not so sure. Hell, they all look alike to me. I suppose they can tell one another apart, unless they're some kind of robots. Anything's possible in this place. I've been locked up here so long, I've lost track of time. Don't know whether it's planting or harvest season, whether Christmas or my birthday's come and gone.

I haven't given up trying to communicate with them. When they first took away my false teeth, I let them know I was mad as hell. Didn't do a lick of good. Instead of roast beef swimming in gravy or fried chicken, they stick some kind of feeding tube in my mouth and squirt in blobs of no-taste slop. Wouldn't feed it to hogs. You ever try swallowing balls of warm putty? It puzzles me, what they wanted my teeth for. Course, they're always poking at me, experimenting on me, so it goes to reason they probably put my dentures through a bunch of tests, too. Would've been decent of them to return them. They probably put 'em in a vat full of chemicals that ate away the palate. Damn bunch of fools.

I miss my eyeglasses more'n my teeth. Can't see anything clearly anymore. Oh, they're a smart bunch of bastards... what I can't see, I can't tell about -- if there was anyone within telling distance. I pretty much got it figured out, though. Ethel, the late missus, and I used to watch them late-night horror shows on Saturday nights. I was never too keen on them, but Ethel, why, she knew more about vampires and Martians than Count Dracula or that Ray Bradbury fellow. If we was watching a movie about werewolves, she could recite when it was made and who was starring in it before the credits rolled by. A real smart woman, my Ethel.

We got our first t.v. set back in 1956, so I guess we must've watched thousands of Saturday night spook shows. So, I know darn well what I'm talking about. Some folks would say I'm a senile old geezer for what I'm going to tell you. God's truth, I'm not. What I am is on another planet. I can remember how it happened, clear as day. I was out in the barn repairing an old harness that had belonged to Dad. Wanted to have it in shape for the Veteran's Day Parade. Me'n Bess, the draft mule, are fixtures in the parade. With me in my top hat and a fresh coat of paint on the surrey, we make a pretty picture, clopping down Main Street behind the Legion Band. I wonder whatever became of Bess and the surrey? Anyway, I was in the barn when all of a sudden I start to feeling queer. Kind of light-headed and tingly -- like I was being poked by straight pins. The barn got real dark, and I staggered toward the open doorway. The last I recollect was a big flash of light, a small explosion, and seeing my arms and legs

floating up in the air.

There's no way you can convince me different that a damn bunch of aliens didn't suck me up in their space ship. Probably figured that being old and without close family, no one'd miss me. I may be old, but I got plenty of friends in town and a daughter out in California. They're probably outta their minds worrying where I got off to.

When the drug they gave me wore off, I woke up right here in this bed. Didn't even give me a chance to settle in before they started experimenting on me. Had some kind of machine hooked up with tubes shoved up my nose. I yanked them out first thing, figuring they were slipping sleeping gas or worse into me. Went into convulsions before they found me. When they shoved them hoses back in, I let them. What them tubes was for was oxygen. Their atmosphere must be like up top of the Rocky Mountains: thin and puny. Gradually got accustomed to the climate and the tubes was removed.

At first, they didn't feed me at all. Guess they thought I was like them and didn't need to eat. They pumped water into me through a straw stuck in my left hand, but that's all. Guess I must've shrunk some before they decided to inject that warm putty into my mouth a couple times a day. What I wouldn't give for a piece of hot peach pie.

Like I was saying, they're forever poking and prodding me, giving me shots. Some make me go off in a dream-like state and I'm back on the farm growing up or I'm with Ethel... Others make me feel wild and crazy, like the first time I got drunk. I do know that whatever's in them shots makes it so I can't get up and out of this bed. Once they started the shots, they didn't need to strap me down any more. I'm as helpless as a newborn.

I think they've got other folks locked up here, too. Every once in a while, I hear crying and moaning. Can't tell if them calling out is male or female, young or old. Sets me to wondering how the others are being treated. I don't feel much, except when they stick the needles in. Should I be relieved?

There's no smells here. I recollect, after a spring rain, when the whole world smelled like trampled grass and bare roots. I know the aroma of a bite of apple, the scent of my Ethel after a soak in the tub. Those attending me don't have any odor. Not sweat or perfume, or the oil used to keep machinery running smooth. Last week, I woke up with my hand beneath my cheek. It was pressed against my nose. It was like smelling a brand new porcelain commode...odorless.

So, I can't see or taste or smell. My hearing works, but there's nothing to listen to. Confined to bed, there's little of value to touch. Sometimes I touch myself just to see if I'm really here. If my hands was to encounter nothing, this'd all be a dream. It's not. My hip bones stick out like one of them Paris fashion models. The flesh on my arms has gone loose and stringy. My nose hangs out over my chin like the sail on a boat. I got myself memorized. I know the coverings on the bed, too. There's three. The one closest to my body is stiff and a little scratchy, like brand-new underwear. Then there's a thin, soft blanket followed by some kind of quilt filled with air. Pretty limited world to feel.

It's all a part and parcel of them trying to do away with me. You take away a man's little pleasures, and pretty soon he don't care about any of the big ones. Only, they overlooked memory. I remember the feel of Ethel next to me in our big, old, double bed. I know how the farmhouse smelled before a Thanksgiving dinner, and what a dollop of whipping cream tasted like on a wedge of pumpkin pie. I got them beat at their own game. They take away and take away, and all the

while, I remember more and better things.

When one of them came in for my mid-day feeding today, it brought along a companion. I could tell right off it was different from them. Was wearing something red. It came up close to where I lay, mumbling all the while. For just a second, I smelled lilacs. Swear to God, it leaned right down to my face and touched me. Anyway, I think it touched me. I felt something warm against my cheek, coulda been a touch of sunlight. It stayed in the room awhile, then left. As soon as the "red it" was gone, in came one of the colorless ones to close the shades.

Can't figure it out. No shot this afternoon, if it was afternoon; no rolling me from side to side to see if I'd cry out. You lose track of how your body feels in motion. So, on occasion, they move you to test your reaction. If it's right after I've been asleep, I yell a bit, fearing they'll dump me right on the floor. Damn fools.

I been laying here thinking about what they'd do with me if I should die. Always planned to be buried next to Ethel, in the Garner Township Cemetery. It's about a quarter mile down the road from the homeplace. Big, lacy fir trees surround it on three sides, and the fourth is open to the road. In the winter, it's a beautiful spot, buried in snow, with the cry of the wind all about. In the other seasons, the land's fallow, then bristling with corn and beans, and, finally, golden brown like toast and just as dry. My name's already on the stone with Ethel's. All's it needs is my dates. When they get done cutting and preserving my body, there won't be nothing left to put in the ground. Saddens me. I'd always counted on joining back up with Ethel. She was a good woman.

For the past couple minutes, I been aware someone's in the room with me. I can hear 'em breathing -- like someone with emphysema. Could be the "its" brought me a room mate. It's so damn dark in here I can't see my hand in front of my face, much less a roommate. Whoever it is needs to get on one of them oxygen machines they equipped me with when I first got here.

Lord, I'm getting sleepy. Feel like I could sleep through a week and a day. No chance, what with them coming in to persecute me every hour or two. But it does feel good to be warm and relaxed, almost like being back on Earth.

Outside the room, down a dimly-lit corridor, in front of a curved platform desk, a woman wept quietly. A nurse patted her shoulder and tucked a Kleenex into her hand. "You mustn't cry. He wants to go home. He's ready. No one, nothing can stop him."

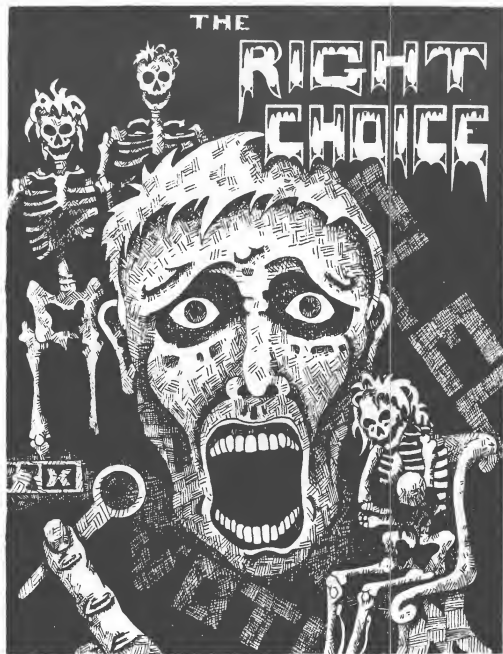
"I know," she sobbed, hiccupping. "It was seeing him so helpless. The last time I saw him, he looked like my dad: tall, erect, full of silly jokes. Today, oh God..."

The nurse led the woman in red down yet another hallway to a visitor's room. While she prepared a cup of tea, the alien in Room 202 escaped and returned home.

— — — **DR** — — —



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It was voting day in Harder Court, Nebraska - a big event for the small farming town of 125, located 35 miles west of the Air Force Global Weather Center in Omaha. Most of the people were farmers, working the land that had been in their families since Nebraska became a state in 1867.

People of Harder Court took their right to vote seriously. They exercised that privilege at every election, and especially when the election was for the President of the United States.

The Town Council decorated the storefronts with red-white-and-blue banners. Weather permitting, tables were lined along the sidewalks to display homemade pies, cakes, and crafts. Yes, voting day was a big event in Harder Court.

Wilbur Crandall and his wife of twenty years, Eva, drove into town around ten. Eva had baked several of her blueribbon gooseberry pies. Mayor Wilson greeted the Crandalls with a cheerful "Mornin'" and a friendly wave.

"Pretty day for a picnic, Wilbur!"

"Sure nough, Mr. Mayor, sure is!" Wilbur replied.

After making the rounds of hellos, Eva proudly placed her pies alongside Mrs. Smother's cakes on the front row table. The picnic would take place after everyone had voted. Together, Wilbur and Eva walked hand in hand to the courthouse. It was time.

Eva went first. The entire process was slow, since there was only one voting booth for the town. Then it was Wilbur's turn. He patted his wife on the shoulder as he entered the booth and pulled the curtain. The choice was easy. Wilbur would vote for the current President, the man who represented the party he had always voted for. It was the same with his father, and his father's father, and so on. There was never any question about it. Never the slightest consideration for any other party. The choice was clear. Wilbur reached for the red lever in Row A without thinking, without thinking this was no ordinary election year. The issues, now, were more crucial. More deadly.

-- "Islamic Government Toppled"

-- "Leftists Take Control"

-- "Soviet Advisors Arrive in Tehran"

-- "U.S. Issues Warning"

-- "Rapid Deployment Force on Alert"

-- "Soviets Send Troops to Tehran"

-- "Another Warning From U.S."

-- "Naval Forces Ordered to Persian Gulf"

-- "Soviets Control Oil Fields in Iran"

-- "Dogfight With Soviet M.G. Fighters and American F-15's"

-- "Confusion on Both Sides as to Who Drew First Blood"

-- "Soviet Diplomats Expelled From U.S."

- "U.S. Diplomats Leave Soviet Union"
- "Talks on Avoiding 'War' Fail"
- "U.S. Ultimatum Deadline Expires"
- "150 Servicemen on Ship killed by Iranians"
- "U.S. Blames Soviet Backfire Bombers"

Wilbur knew all these things. But what Wilbur didn't know, what no one knew, was that government officials and their families had already secretly evacuated Washington, D.C.

If war was inevitable, it would be better, in Wilbur's opinion, to have a president who was not afraid to show the world the U.S. could not be intimidated. This was no time to change horses in mid-stream. The current president was in the middle of this crisis - let him finish the job. And with that assurance, Wilbur pulled the red lever in Row A. Smiled. Turned and opened the curtain.

Wilbur froze, stunned by what he saw. What was once the lobby of the courthouse was now a pile of rubble. The building was gone. The town was gone. Eva...was gone.

Still not believing what he was seeing, he walked out toward the street. Several people were sitting on a stone bench. 'Odd,' he thought, 'these people sitting among all this mess.' Wilbur wondered if perhaps a tornado came through while he was voting. "Was I so caught up in voting I didn't hear the sirens?" Wilbur said out loud.

As he came closer to the people on the bench, he realized these people were dead. Burned beyond recognition. One of them was clutching a bundle, like laundry. Wilbur couldn't imagine why someone would hug laundry so tight. Then, he noticed the laundry had a head. It was a baby. He suspected this person had to be Mary Thomas, since she was the only woman in Harder Court who'd had a baby recently. Wilbur remembered Mary had said her first day out with her baby girl was going to be at the Election Day Picnic. Today. Hell Day.

Another person had his hand raised to the sky, as if pointing to something just before... just before what? What had happened?

"This can't be real!" Wilbur shouted. "I'm having a dream - a nightmare!"

Wilbur pinched himself on the arm to see if he could wake from this horrible sleep, but he was still there, standing next to the charred corpses. One thing for sure: whatever happened, happened so fast those people didn't have time to run.

Wilbur walked alone, calling for Eva, frantically searching for anybody who could tell him what was going on. He passed by the barber shop foundation, and the schoolyard. He saw footprints of people who were probably standing in that spot at the time of...

Finally, he saw human figures coming toward him. At least, he thought they were human. They were all naked, but Wilbur couldn't tell if they were men or women. Their skin was hanging down from their cheeks and limbs. They looked to Wilbur like monsters with sagging faces and arms. He watched as they passed by him, trance-like. One of the monsters walked on his ankles, dragging his feet. Others walked on tiptoes. All had large, oozing blisters.

Weak and sick, Wilbur collapsed in the street and threw up. As he put his hands to his mouth, he saw, for the first time, the horrid condition of his own body. He felt something moving on his head. His hair was crackling.

"I'm alive!" Wilbur yelled, "I don't want to be. What's happening...and, why?"

Wilbur thought back to how this terror had begun. "The voting booth! That's it! I've got to get back there!"

Wilbur struggled to his feet and headed for the courthouse remains. He had only moved a few feet when he noticed someone sitting in the middle of his path. This person was sitting very still, facing east, away from Wilbur. For a brief moment, he imagined it might even be his beloved Eva and whispered her name.

"Wilbur?" the person replied.

"Eva? It is you!" Wilbur was thrilled he had found his wife. He grabbed for her. As he did, she turned. Wilbur looked into the melted face of Eva. This didn't matter to Wilbur. This was his love, and he held on to her until she crumbled in his arms.

After he buried Eva, Wilbur continued his journey to the voting booth. Finally, there it was, standing alone, like some ominous creature observing the chaos. Wilbur ran to its entrance, pulling and tugging at the curtain to open.

"Let me in! I've got to get in!"

"Wilbur!" someone said. "Are you crazy? What on earth are you doing? Let go of my drapes!"

Wilbur shook his head, blinked his eyes and awoke to find himself clawing at the bedroom curtains. Eva was alive. The world was alive. He was safe. He was only dreaming. Wasn't he?

That day, Wilbur and Eva really did drive to Harder Court to vote. Everything was just as Wilbur had seen it in his dream: the banners on the shops, the rows of tables for pies and cakes, the people on the stone bench. He made a special effort to say hello to the proud Mary Thomas and her new baby, Amanda.

This time, when Wilbur entered the voting booth, he pulled the red lever in Row B. Smiled. Turned and opened the curtain.

Wilbur froze. Stunned by what he saw...he screamed.

BY BARBARA PROENZA

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NEW SPWAO NEWSLETTER EDITOR

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EARTHTRIP

BY

COLLEEN DRIPPE'

I looked at the things on John's calloused palm. They were dirt-colored, mottled black and brown, dull, flat disks. I had seen that kind of acid before -- it wasn't very good and was usually cut with speed or something.

"Sure," Bill said, accepting one. "Why not?"

We girls looked at each other, Heather and I, and then, with a shrug, she reached for one. I followed, noticing as I did that John's hands needed washing.

He had been up here, in his folks' cabin at M , for over two weeks, "getting his head together," as he said. He did seem content, though the room in which the four of us stood was a shambles and his cut-offs and ragged, flannel shirt were wrinkled and filthy. There was even dust in his hair...

Heather and I had cleaned up the kitchen enough to cook some brown rice and make a salad. There wasn't anything else available and I, for one, was surprised. John had never been much into health foods before, but I supposed this was a part of "getting it together."

We ate in what I think was a family room. Bill and I sat on orange bean-bag pillows, plates balanced on our knees, as we forked up tomatoes, raw mushrooms and some kind of wilted sprouts along with the ever present rice. I don't think Bill liked it much, even though he shovelled it in, washing everything down with generous swigs of beer.

Heather sat with John -- he was why she'd come up with us, but he seemed indifferent to the compliment. He talked steadily between mouthfuls, praising the natural life and telling about his rambles here on the mountain, his thing for Mother Earth and a lot more.

And then, after the sunset and three or four joints and a few more beers, he brought out the acid. "I got it from a friend up here," he said, and there was something funny in the way he said it, though no one else seemed to notice.

So, we dropped the acid and I asked for a glass of milk because sometimes I get a little sick when I first come on, and I usually have an ice cream cone or something to mellow things out. Bill and Heather laughed at me, a friendly laugh, and anyway there was no ice cream, of course, or milk, either, so I had some orange juice. The kitchen was still pretty bad and the light bulb had burned out, so I felt my way to the ice box, crunching bits of, I hoped, vegetable matter underfoot.

Beyond the counters on the far wall was an uncurtained window. The sky was midnight color and the stars were huge. The mountains were a blackish mass and I could almost feel the upward tilt of them, carpeted as they were with bristly mats of pine needles and spired with the trees themselves.

I couldn't get into this place, all right; maybe old John didn't have such a bad idea. And then -- and I swear it was too soon for the acid to have come on -- I saw...well, I sensed, anyway, just an impression of something slow. Dreaming slow and still, rooted in earth. It was watching me from nearby and reaching out somehow.

Inviting...

I must have made some sound because suddenly the impression dissipated. Almost immediately, Bill was behind me. He swore as he tripped over the clattering mop bucket.

"What's keeping you, Cin? Spaced out on the view?"

"Something... I felt something out there. Something..." I tried in vain to convey the sense of inexorableness, of patient, vegetable waiting. Bill only grunted.

"Probably a bear. They're supposed to be curious. You know, knock over garbage cans and stuff."

I drew a long, shuddering breath and picked up my orange juice. "It wasn't like that at all," I began, when I heard someone else come into the room. For a moment, I stiffened, sensing... I don't know what. I smelled something like new-turned earth.

"What's going on in here?" It was John and I sagged with relief.

"Cindy saw a bear," Bill said. "A big, black grizzly."

"They don't have grizzly bears around here," I snapped. For a moment - reaction, maybe -- I wondered what I had ever seen in him, red-faced above beard and sideburns, already beginning a beer belly. I drew away from him.

John hadn't said anything, and now I felt his eyes on me, though he was only a shadow in the dark kitchen. "Could have been a deer, or anything," he said, quietly. "Some pretty tame animals around here."

I opened my mouth and then shut it. John laid one hand on my arm and his fingers were rough and cold as I let him guide us both back into the other room.

"John wants to take us up on the mountain," Bill told me, squinting his bloodshot eyes in the light. "He knows a place to watch the moon rise over the lake."

I looked around for Heather and found her rummaging in her suitcase for a sweater. In a few minutes, we were all climbing into John's Volkswagen, Bill and I stuffed snugly and uncomfortably in the back seat.

"We could hike up," John was saying. "I really get off on walking in the dark. You know, like 'Don Juan...' man, you just hold your head up and do it..." He stopped for a minute to fumble his key into the ignition. The light, of course, didn't work. "Anyway, I guess you're not used to things up here. What a trip it's been. Just me and Mother Earth. And dirt; man, did you ever just get into plain, old soil? How heavy it is? How, you know, elemental? Come from dirt, go back to dirt..."

Yes, I decided, that acid must be cut with speed. I began to feel it a bit, myself. Very physical -- an adrenaline rush like Christmas morning when you're a little kid, and yeah, my stomach was pretty queasy.

We headed away from the cabin, on a little dirt road going generally up. Beneath us, tall weeds scraped the bottom of the car and I could tell that if John came this way much, he must have come on foot. Trees and bushes seemed thicker in the headlights, doubled in shadow, and once in a while we caught a pair of eyes...

After a while, the trees thinned out to the left of us and I realized with a shock that there was a pretty steep drop on that side. The ground fell away in tiers, like some dark stairway made for giants. Far below, starlight reflected on water.

Already, something glowed bluish through the trees, beyond the lake, and, for a moment, John quit talking. My eyes weren't seeing too clearly -- it looked like blue tendrils reaching across to us, arching above the lake in bleached, squirming rainbows...

"Hey, let up, woman. You're digging holes in my arm." That was Bill. I relaxed slightly, but I couldn't take my eyes from the apparition.

"Neat, huh?" I heard Heather say, and I was slightly reassured.

"Now, watch there, above the trees," John said, acting as if he were somehow responsible for the show. "Here...it...comes!"

Almost like magic, a gleaming, white ball lay atop the black, ragged silhouette of the pines. I gasped, overwhelmed at the purity of it. Another world - not just the plain old moon, but another honest-to-god world hanging there in space...

I heard John fumble with the door and a moment later, he got out. "Have to take a leak," he said, stepping behind the car. Yes, he was a pretty earthy guy.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Heather burred, and I envied her.

As for me, I grew more uneasy by the moment, and when Bill started to chuckle at nothing, it didn't help any.

Suddenly, John was back on my side, holding down the front seat. "Come on, let's all go for a walk," he said, but he was only looking at me. A dark current seemed to pass between us and I resisted it. "It's really heavy up here," he said, touching my cheek lightly. "Go beyond your fear. Be part of it all..."

Slowly, I climbed out of the car, but Bill did not follow. He had opened another beer and seemed content where he was.

Heather opened her door and stumbled out. She came around to our side and leaned against me. "Isn't it beautiful, Cindy?" she asked. "All that light..." And I knew she was someplace else for sure.

"Yeah, I can dig it," John said, not looking to where she



pointed. "But try the other side, now." He turned us around to look over the top of the car at the slope above us.

I stared, for a moment horrified, until the scene resolved itself. For an instant, I saw a group of shadowy giants regarding us from the moonlit meadow. They towered above us, wrapped in some shapeless garments -- blankets, maybe -- and I could just make out the gleam of their pitiless eyes.

Then, I realized they were fir trees, the kind where the branches go all the way to the ground. They had to be...

John laid an arm about each of us and Heather murmured something about jewels in the sky. He turned to me. "What was it, Cindy? What did you see?"

"People," I mumbled. "Up there..."

He nodded, as though I gave the right answer. "It's a holy mountain," he said. "That's where he lives -- my friend with the acid..."

I could believe it.

"He's part of the earth, you know?" John went on, releasing Heather. "Part and parcel of Mother Earth..." He led me around the car and we began the ascent.

I didn't want to go. Not that time. Not stoned and tripping and in the middle of the night and me all weirded out. But he reached for me and I went with him.

The earth smell was very strong here and my feet sank into spongy soil. We passed the first clump of firs and he pulled me along beneath them. One branch brushed lightly across my head, like a benediction... Dreamlike, I passed willingly over the boundary of the world I had known into a place where I well knew trees might speak and anything could happen...

We passed the trees and continued to climb. The backs of my legs began to ache. I didn't realize at first, when we stopped; suddenly, I was sitting among dewy weeds, in wet, cold jeans, with John squatting beside me.

A few clouds chased across the sky and the moon did pearly glowing things to them like in some old painting. I forgot John and watched the sky; now a drifting dragon, now a bearded god blotting out the stars. The coldness, the remoteness of clouds and stars and moon suddenly attracted me and gave me a feeling of safety. They were so clean...

After a long time -- but what is time when you're on acid, and not very good acid at that? -- I heard a scrabbling noise and saw that John had excavated a shallow trench, apparently with his bare hands, and was sitting in it. Somehow, he had shed his clothing, as well, and the moon shone pale on his bare skin.

I stared at him, thinking some mixed-up thoughts about graves and things dead and not dead and squirming secret things beneath the ground...

"Look," he said, suddenly snaring my wrist. "Earth. Dirt. Holy ground..." Moonlight hit his hair, which was blonde and curly and down on his neck some. "Roots," he was saying. "Roots of things and burrowing worms. Decay, rebirth -- man, that's where it's at!"

For some reason, the earth smell came stronger than the evergreens and I inhaled it dizzily, feeling as though I, too, were a root pulling in soil and water. Life quivered to the tips of my fingers and toes and my hair rose slightly, feathering out as if seeking something...

The light caught John's eyes, like bits of fevered obsidian beneath the paleness of his forehead. His beard seemed to move, writhing, and

I would not, for anything, have touched it.

"Does your friend really live up here?" I asked him, pulling my arm from his grasp.

"Oh, for sure," he said. I saw the flash of teeth as he smiled broadly. "You met him. I walked you right by him. I think he likes you."

I shook my head. "No one..." I faltered and thought of the tree which had laid one branch gently on my hair.

He grinned, stretching his mouth even further. "I'm almost ready," he said. "The ultimate trip. Been talking to him, you know. Can't handle any more of this plastic shit. Earth's about wrecked up -- too many people don't care..."

"John," I said, crawling stiffly to my feet, "What you are saying is weird, you know, really weird. You've been alone too long."

"Alone? I got the soil, don't I? Lying on the breast of my mother, dig it?" A low chuckle. And there he sat, in his little grave with nothing on, babbling about nature and world spirits and brown rice and I wondered if I could find my way back to the car. I had a feeling it was a long way back, and not just in physical terms.

I was cold, too, and while I was still pretty high, I was definitely not hallucinating. Somehow, the night had gotten used up. I heard a couple of birds give experimental chirps, while the sky began to lighten.

Down the hill, the trees were silent, grayish forms, waiting -- I could tell that -- waiting for something important...

John had shut up some time back and I realized I had spaced out for a while on those trees. Yes, I was still high.

When I turned back, he had a strained look on his face -- a solemn, exalted and utterly stoned look -- and there were pine needles and dirt mixed in his hair.

He stretched out one hand to me, but I would not take it. I didn't want anything more to do with him.

He kept that funny look on his face as the hand began to darken and crumble. His whole arm fell off into the hole, and then -- and I swear I was not seeing things -- the rest of him followed.

I lost it about then. Like a kid, I ran for comfort to the nearest big person...

They found me later, Bill and Heather, with my arms wrapped about a fir tree, one cheek pressed into the bark. I didn't -- couldn't -- tell them anything.

There was a search for John; things ended between Bill and me, and Heather got really funny after that. One of John's neighbors showed up, a tall, dark-bearded guy with a ponytail who said it was okay, John would turn up. "He takes off, sometimes. Just like that. Sticks out his thumb and next thing you know, he's in Portland maybe, or L.A. Just lock up when you go..." And his hands, I saw, were deep-stained with earth...

In the end, we drove back together to B... I had a pocketful of brownish-black acid tabs -- though I didn't tell the others.

I dimly remember the greenness in the dawn and I guess John's friend gave them to me.

I didn't go back to school the fall semester and I haven't seen Bill or Heather much. I worked for a while in a restaurant, but that didn't last.

It's my hands, see. I can't seem to keep them clean and the smell of soap makes me gag. My dreams, too, are troubled with the green stiffness of fir people who whisper things to me. Things I forget when I wake. The smells, though, I remember clearly: resin, overlaid



with the heavy, heavy scent of deep soil in moonlight.

And I see, again, John's hand as it crumbles...

I'll hitch back up to M_____ soon, I suppose. I'm almost out of acid, but I probably won't need much more...

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G A S

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE
GROSS
AMERICANS'
SOCIETY



*Please, check out the back
unnumbered pages of this issue
for GAS #2 (ad). It's an
odious menu of culinary
delights, you won't want to
miss!*

The Recipe

BY

CHARLOTTE BROWN HAMMOND

Delsie Timkin shelled the last pod, watching the fat peas dribble into the pan on her lap. She glanced at the wall phone to her left, then brushed her fingertips over the cover of the paperback romance on the counter.

She could almost feel the silky texture of the hero's hair; could almost bury her fingers in the wiry thatch on his rugged chest. She sighed. Lance Duval. Even his name was exciting and sexy.

Then Delsie glanced at the other book, this one spread open before her. She frowned. Why did some authors have to use such hard words? She sure wished that library lady would hurry up and call back.

Her wish was granted. She jerked the receiver from its hook.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Timkin?"

"Yuh! I mean yes!"

"This is the Library Research Center with the information you wanted. If you're ready, I'll start with 'Bufo Marinus.' Bufo Marinus is a toad, Mrs. Timkin, possessing chemicals ---"

"A toad, huh? Just a minute." Delsie didn't care what the darned critter did, she just wanted to know what it was. She hunched the receiver between ear and shoulder, licked the tip of a wooden pencil and scrawled a word in the margin of the book.

"Toad," she said as she wrote. "Okay, what's next?"

"Caotcha," said the polite voice. "A succulent with peculiarly contorted ---"

"Suck-you-lent? What's that?" It sounded obscene. Puckering her brow, Delsie poised her pencil above the page.

"A type of cactus," replied the voice.

"Oh. That's better." Delsie's lips moved as she jotted the word.

"Cactus. Got it. Go on."

"The last one, pois gratter, is a legume --- oh, never mind. It's a member of the pea family, Mrs. Timkin. The pois gratter is also known as the 'itching pea' because the hairs on its pod will make you think you have slivers of glass beneath your sk---"

"Forget that part." Delsie smiled as she scribbled "pea" in the book. That one would sure be easy. She glanced at the pan of peas she'd shelled for supper. "Thanks a lot, Miss. You're a real big help."

Pronouncing each of the ingrediants under her breath, she studied the formula for making hair grow. Eager to get on with her project, she decided to ignore the asterisk beside the title. Footnotes were a pain in the butt. That much she recalled from her high school English classes years ago. And there sure were a bushel of them in this old book.

"Wicca Recipes for Health and Fortune." Funny how she'd found it



in that box of old books she's been scrounging through. Sam hated for her to spend money on romances. He called them trash. So whenever she wanted some different ones, she always picked up a nice bunch, real cheap, at that weird, scruffy little second hand place down on Marvel Street.

"Handful Pois Gratter, mashed'." Delsie measured out half a cup of peas and dumped them into the blender.

The word "recipes" on the cover of this beat-up book was what had grabbed her attention yesterday. She liked to try out different recipes on her husband. Else she'd have gone right past the book. Sam always said she was the best cook in town. Lucky she did flip through it, too. Lucky for Sam. How else would a body ever dream that anyone could grow hair where hair didn't grow anymore!

"Spine of puffer Fish, finely pulverized." Delsie opened the fridge, removed a plastic sack and added its contents to the blender. The backbone of the trout she'd broiled for supper last night would do just as well. Wouldn't Sam be tickled! With all that hair, he was going to look almost like that sexy Lance Duval.

"One Sea Worm, entire." Ugh. Now where the heck would I get a varmit like that! Got to make do with something close --- ah! I know!"

Spatula in one hand and table knife in the other, she hurried outside to her tulip bed. Sure enough. A fat garden slug, about three inches long, disregarding the poison Delsie had spread last week, was busily eating holes in her tulip leaves.

"Come to me, honeybunch."

Prodding with the knife, Delsie pushed the slimy creature onto the spatula and brought it into her kitchen.

"Get in there, you." She poked him into the blender and slapped on the lid.

Sam would be so thrilled. She loved her husband with all her heart, but --- well, he wasn't exactly Robert Redford. Or Dustin Hoffman. Or Lance Duval, either.

"Liver and Heart, Bufo Marinus, mashed." Yuck. Well, I guess that's no problem," Delsie mumbled.

She would just use a frog instead of a toad. Dump the whole thing in there. Plenty of frogs down at the end of the street in that swampy vacant lot where nobody wanted to build. Wouldn't be any trouble to catch a little one.

Delsie nodded, smiling. After the hair started growing, she'd put Sam on a diet. Take off some of that blubber around his waist. Lance Duval wasn't tubby. Neither were Robert or Dustin. Sexy men were lean and virile. And hairy.

"Caotchu, one cup, Pulp and points." Delsie shook her head. "Never did care much for cactus. Too bad. Now I got to go out and buy one."

An hour later, Delsie pitched a small round cactus plant and a frog, the size of her tumb, into the blender. Then she set the dial for the highest speed and switched it on.

Chin in palms, elbows on the counter, she studied the book to find out what came next.

"Place over hot fire. Bring to rapid boil. Lower flame and simmer for thirty minutes." Easy!" She scrooched up her face at all the strange words she was supposed to chant. And how about all those weird excerizes with the hands? Well, she guessed she could sound the words out. And she could sure wave her arms around like the book said, too.

When the brew came to a boil, she turned the burner to low.

"My God, what a stink!" The putrid odor filled the kitchen. She grabbed a jar of paprika, sprinkled liberally, then stirred. Next, some cinnamon. Nutmeg. A splash of vanilla. The recipe didn't call for spices, but that shouldn't matter.

She sniffed, still stirring the gluey mixture.

"That's some better, anyhow," she muttered. "Throw some perfume in there, too, after a while, make it smell more like hair tonic."

Eying the recipe, she flung herself into action as the concoction simmered and popped. Tips of fingers to her forehead, then to her heart, she intoned the prescribed words aloud. Her sing-song chant halted and stumbled, now and then, over the unfamiliar sounds.

"Or-mazd, Ahura Mazda, uh, harken to my plea." Swoosh, zap --- her hands drew patterns on the air.

"Pray bid thy Army of uh, Archangels --- make fertile this um, fallow soil. Persephone, Gaia, Demeter, pray fruc --- uh, fructify this barren waste, make bountiful this harvest of vill --- uh, villosity."

Delsie noticed she got better at it as she repeated the phrases and gestures, over and over.

When the thirty minutes were up, she sniffed and turned off the burner.

"Still stinks like a tub of dirty socks," she muttered as she stirred in a dollop of "Glorious Nights" cologne. "Hope it works better than it smells."

She scraped the viscous muck into a clean peanut butter jar. As it cooled it took on the consistency and color of ---

"Snot," Delsie said as she screwed on the lid.

That evening Sam seemed to be in a lousy mood.

"The roast is overdone," he said.

"Sorry, honeybunch. Here, why don't you take my slice? It's pretty rare." Lance wouldn't nag Roseanne about a dumb hunk of meat, she thought.

"Creamed peas again." Sam stabbed with his fork. "Had creamed peas just last week."

"Guess we did." Delsie brightened. "Fresh asparagus in the markets now. We'll have some tomorrow." Lance would be gazing romantically at Roseanne, his thick locks a copper flame in the candlelight. Maybe Delsie would buy some candles tomorrow. Sam's hair should be growing by then.

"Uuh-huh," Sam rumbled.

That's how the evening went. As per expected. Sam grumping and Delsie trying to please.

"Can't you find something better to read than that stupid drivel?" Sam rustled his newspaper.

Delsie closed her paperback and set it on the side table. Face down, so Sam wouldn't get more chance to sneer at the picture of virile, rugged Lance Duval looming over innocent-but-sensual Roseanne Hawthorne on the cover.

"You look tired tonight, luv. How about a long soothing bath and then a nice massage?" Sam had always adored it when she pampered him. Used to say she made him feel like a king.

Sam glanced up from the financial page. One corner of his mouth crept upward, ever so slightly. Joy rose in Delsie's breast.

"Sounds good," he grunted.

Delsie ran Sam's water, tossing in lavish handfuls of bath salts, sloshing in an abundance of bubble bath. Lots and lots of foam and fragrance, that was the ticket.

While Sam soaked, Delsie fetched the peanut butter jar with its

magical tonic. She removed her blouse. No use getting it all soggy. "Got a suprise for you, sugar." She set the jar on the toilet tank. "Going to massage your scalp with a brand new ointment. Supposed to be a sure-fire thing for growing hair. Want to do it while you're in the tub, though, honeybunch, becuase it's going to be kind of messy."

"Uuh."

Sam was reclining against the rear wall of the bathtub. He cracked one eye open. His smooth chest and stomach poked through the blanket of perfumed foam like twin baby hillocks guarded by their mountainous mama. So cute, thought Delsie. Maybe just a little diet. He wouldn't have to be quite as lean as Lance. With all his new hair, he'd be bound to get more romantic, no matter how stout he was.

Scooping out a blob, Delsie began rubbing the mess into the skin on Sam's barren pate. His nose twitched.

"Peculiar smell, Dels. Where'd you find this stuff?"

She ignored his question.

"Sit up, hon. Let's put some on your chest, too."

Sam heaved himself up to a sitting position, splashing bubbles and water on Delsie's bra and skin. She brushed the foam from her bosom, then slapped a glob of ointment on Sam's chest, massaging it into his wet flesh.

"Huh. It sort of stings." Sam's complaint was mild. He reached up and scratched his scalp.

"Don't rub it off, luv." She pushed his hand away.

Suddenly Delsie remembered something. Wasn't she supposed to repeat that chant while applying the stuff? She nodded to herself. But how did the words go? She couldn't recall. She'd better look at them again.

"Got to do something, hon. Be back in a minute," she said. Palms and fingers still covered with paste, she hurried to the kitchen and jerked open the drawer where she'd stuffed the old volume. She flipped to the hair recipe. Lucky thing she'd thought to stick a scrap of paper between the pages.

"Ormazd, Ahura Mazda, harken to my..." Absently, as she read, she scratched at the light tickling sensation on her jaw and chest.

A roar from the bathroom.

"Delsie! Wipe this glop off me!"

She glanced up, then back at the book. So what was a little sting compared to growing a gorgeous crop of hair?

"...make fertile this fallow soil..."

"I'm burning up, Dels! Hurry up! Get in here!"

Sam sure sounded upset. Must be worse than she thought.

"...pray fructify this barren ---"

"Delsie!" Sam bellowed. A tremendous whoosh --- like a whale flopping in a pond.

Now her fingers shook. Her pulse pounded. What had she done to poor Sam?

"Help!" Glub, glub.

Delsie raced, book in hand.

Sam's buttocks were high out of the water, his knees folded under him. His head was a vague crimson globular shape beneath the water and suds.

Water gushed from the spout, pounding on the back of Sam's scalp.

"You'll drown, Sam!" Delsie screeched. She clutched at his slippery shoulders and tried to hoist him up. His weight was too much for her. She grabbed for his ears. It was like trying to catch quicksilver. Her fingers slipped. Arms half-girdling his middle, she

tried to haul him out. Sam stayed under.

Sobbing, Delsie turned off the faucets. Gasping, she pushed up the lever to open the drain.

Sam's haunches lurched sideways. The water line began to retreat. Like a massive sea lion, wounded and beached, Sam lay on his left flank in the slowly ebbing tide and evaporating bubbles. Delsie tugged, slipped, pulled. No use.

Sam's head was a blaze of crimson. The skin covering his skull was dotted with a myriad of tiny flaming bumps --- like slivers of glass embedded in the flesh. A bruise showed where he had bumped the drain release in his frantic effort to cool the fiery torment. His eyes were wide open, his mouth agape in a rictus snarl. His clawed fingers were as motionless as his heart.

Delsie rushed for the telephone.

Then, dutiful housewife that she was, even in her shock and remorse, Delsie hung up a fallen towel, stuffed Sam's discarded underwear and the recipe book in the hamper, tucked the peanut butter jar inside the cabinet, and put on her blouse. Her actions were automatic. By the time the ambulance medics arrived, the bathroom was tidy.

Sam's flesh had resumed its normal hue and texture. Naturally, his skin had already begun to take on the grey pallor of death, but no trace of bumps or undue redness remained. The force of the gushing water had rid him of the ointment.

Accidental death by drowning, the medics said. Must have fallen, everyone assumed. What a shame, they said. Big, healthy man like that, in the prime of life.

The furor over, Sam's body gone, Delsie drained of tears, wanted nothing more than blessed, numbing sleep. She fumbled at the blouse button beneath her chin. It wouldn't come open.

She tried again. Some barrier prevented her fingers from latching on to the smooth plastic disk.

"What in the world...?"

She dropped her hands to where she could see her open palms, her fingers. There was a barrier, sure enough. A soft coat of fuzz covered every pore, every wrinkle, every bit of flesh where the ointment had once been.

Her fingers looked like overgrown caterpillars, her palms like furry nests. Even as she stared, the fine matting of hair thickened and grew longer.

"Good grief! That footnote!" She lunged for the hamper, retrieved the book, and tore it open.

"To be administered only to women. Use with caution. Do not apply where hair is not wanted."

The magic potion did work as intended, after all.

The Catch to Creative Writing Courses

BY

KEVIN J. ANDERSON

Millions of people want to be writers. I suspect (without any evidence, mind you) that SF/fantasy readers are even more interested than their mainstream-reading counterparts.

A Creative Writing course offered at the local college or university may seem like a panacea for you to learn this greatly desired skill -- and if you're lucky, it could be. But if the course is like so many others, it could be a waste of time and tuition. Before expecting too much from a writing course, keep a few observations in mind.

Undergraduate CW courses are almost always overbooked (everybody wants to be a writer, remember?), and you may have to submit a writing sample to prove your worth. Anxious to be accepted into one particular class, I carefully selected my very best work and put it up for inspection. I was of course pleased when they admitted me into the class...yet within the following weeks it became apparent that several other members in the workshop were truly hopeless neophytes (not necessarily untalented -- simply unpractised). During a private consultation, I mentioned this fact to the professor and asked why those specific people had been selected out of all the hopeful applicants. He responded that it would have been too difficult to choose anyone in particular 'since we all have talent that just needs to be developed,' so he had just picked the first 15 applicants. Please recall that this was an Advanced creative Writing course, not a beginners' workshop.

That's when I remembered the old adage, "Those who can't do, teach." Most CW instructors are not full-time, even moderately successful, writers. More likely the teacher will be someone who has published only a single novel during thirty years of calling him or herself a Writer (and I'll give you three-to-one odds that it was an "artsy" novel). I remember when one of my CW professors had a story accepted by an obscure journal published by the English department of a minor Midwestern college -- his students were in awe, and the rest of the faculty were all a-twitter...yet this journal had a press run smaller even than SPACE & TIME, and paid less than S&T (which itself pays only a quarter cent per word), and had been around for a lot less time. That's when I started to wonder: I had a handful of small press publication credits myself, but it had never occurred to me to teach an Advanced Fiction Workshop.

When a writing instructor sits down and gives you a thorough critique of your story, don't necessarily be tempted to take all of those comments as gospel from the High Priest. Some creative writing teachers believe in giving constant glowing (and often undeserved) praise, since they believe in encouraging potential writers above all else; or they may focus on one aspect (such as grammar) to the

exclusion of everything else in the story, such as plotting, characterization, structure, setting, or foreshadowing. One of my instructors hated SF without qualification, and wanted to know why I didn't write something more 'meaningful.'

In the four CW courses I completed, the professors never once mentioned anything about marketing, or submissions, or persistence, or anything else of practical value in getting published -- in fact, some of the instructors seemed to admire those who wrote strictly for therapy, and occasionally an instructor would go out of his way to discourage a writer from submitting anything until the author was confident the story was perfect. Many new writers are insecure enough that they won't dare to send anything out, especially if the creative writing professor provides the convenient excuse to 'put it through yet another draft until it's ready for an editor to see.'

This may sound like sour grapes, but not so -- I grew to like my instructors a great deal and my writing did improve substantially because they pointed out some of the more obvious mistakes I wasn't catching by myself. But I learned only because I demanded it of the professors, because I was hungry for the specific criticisms that my family and non-writer friends weren't able to give.

Creative Writing courses were not at all what I had expected. You must have realistic expectations, and you must not treat your instructor as a Deity (unless he or she truly is an active and successful author: then you may keep your fingers crossed that the teacher can give you some helpful advice). There's also hope for any instructor who will make you work, and who will be willing to work with you to torture a story into shape. Ask your prospective professor what the class workload will be, what the passing requirements are. (One of my instructors gave an 'A' grade to anyone who had finished only a single story during an entire semester.) Ask the teacher what his or her background is, and why he's teaching the class -- you have a right to know all these things because not only are you paying tuition to take the workshop, but you are also giving up your hard-earned free writing time.



(THE BEST continued from pg. 50)

into flames in front of him. Horrified, he turned and gawked at the figure facing him. A figure with two flashy, red horns protruding from his head, who stood there with a mischievous grin on his face as he beckoned Freddie towards him with a long, bony finger.





Thanks."

(Thank you, Virginia!)

Bobby G. Warner: "Many thanks for sending my contributor's copy of DARK REGIONS #1. You have a WINNER, Joe, and I was pleased to have a story included in your fiction line-up.

The COLOR cover was a delight to the eye. Looks like you're shooting for semi-pro status with your very first issue. You deliver what you promise -- a short story anthology. Many small press dark fantasy magazines feature fiction, but are sprinkled with articles, interviews, puzzles, etc., etc. You give us a wealth of fiction -- and only fiction. I like that and hope your format doesn't change in this respect.

I was really impressed by the stories of Janet Fox and J.N. Williamson, two of my favorite small press (and professional) fantasy writers. Kevin Anderson, as usual came through with a well-crafted story. Your stories, along with Starkey's, Hopper's, and that guy Warner's, firmly root the philosophy in the "darker regions" of the human psyche. You say that David Witte is relatively new to the field. Well, if he continues to turn out SF/fantasy stories like the one in this issue, I'm sure, we'll be seeing a lot more of his fiction in the future.

The artist lineup is a marvel to behold -- Allen K., Jim Garrison, Randy Moore, Borkowski, Klosterman, et al. I am sure if you can continue getting talent like this for DR, you could sell the magazine on the strength of the illos alone!

The overall quality of DR#1 was outstanding, and you're to be congratulated for a very fine job. You may be sure I'll

Jeannette M. Hopper: "I was most pleasantly shocked to receive DARK REGIONS #1 in the mail yesterday; BEAUTIFUL MAGAZINE! I saw that two-color, glossy cover, the nice, heavy stock inside, and all those GREAT full-page illos, and couldn't help but jump up and down and run around flapping it in everyone's faces. That's the most exercise I've gotten in a month. You really surprised me, Joe, by turning out such a Class-A, top-notch publication as a premiere issue; this is not what I've come to expect from the small press.

One nit to pick: A little more careful eye to proof-reading is in order. Through reading the stories (about half, so far), I found many typos. Some misspellings, too.

Thanks for including me in DARK REGIONS #1, it's a good credit. You really pulled it off well. Onward to #2!

(Thanks for the kind words, Jeannette. I know for certain there will be an evident improvement in proofreading in future DR's, thanks to none other than yourself!)

Virginia Bowen: "I enjoyed your premiere issue of DARK REGIONS very much - I would like a year's subscription!

continue to contribute material to DR and will look forward to reading future issues."

(Thanks, Bob! You can bet that we at DR will do our best to produce a quality weird fiction zine for the small press!)

David Daniel: "DARK REGIONS #1 was a damn good read, which is all I ask of a magazine or book. I like the magazine's ambitions: a nice balance of off-beat fiction and artwork. Where it can use some work is in proof-reading (too many typos), though this generally improves with time. And is there some way for your word processor to hyphenate words on the right margin, rather than leave overlarge gaps in some lines? These are minor quibbles, understand, to be put in the "constructive criticism" file.

I particularly enjoyed "The Source of Pain," and "These Hands", and "Something Death Will Never Know," for its imagery.

Enough commentary; suffice it to say that DARK REGIONS is off to a flying start. Good luck!"

(Well David, I hope this issue is the answer to the large type, gaps, and typo problems. Thanks for writing in!)

Judith R. Behunin: "I just wanted you to know how much I enjoyed your Premiere issue of DARK REGIONS. My favorite story was "Getting Rid of Richard." Other favorites were "The Source of Pain" and "These Hands."

(Thanks so much, Judith!)

Jeffrey L. Waters: "Thank you for the copy of your Premiere Issue. "Cille's World," by Janet Fox, had very good suspense and excellent description. The artwork by Al Summa was also very good. I was impressed by the overall quality of the magazine, except for typos, which detracted from my reading pleasure.

(Those darn typos again! Jeff, you can count on an improved issue this time around, and I think you will see DARK REGIONS improve even further as we grow with the small press. Thanks for writing in!)

Well, that's it for now, folks. Thanks for the great comments, and we'll be back in issue #3 with more comments from our readers. Bye! - The Editors.

(Continued from ACKNOWLEDGMENTS page)

writers. Not to mention, he's just a plain good writer. His credits, you ask? Well, Kevin J. Anderson has had his short story, THE OLD MAN AND THE CHERRY TREE (first published in GRUE #3) selected for THE YEARS BEST FANTASY, published by DAW, and I think it's about time. He has been published in FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, has been previously included in the preliminary Nebula Ballots, has seen print in THRESHOLD OF FANTASY, SPACE & TIME, and a whole lot more. He is also working on a new novel, entitled: FLASHBACK. I can't wait until it's published.

Well, that about does it, and thanks for listening to the praise concerning these talented writers - Joe Morey, Editor.

G A S

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE
GROSS
AMERICANS'
SOCIETY

Sometime,
Early 1987

#2



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